

# Harlem



## SUMMARY

The speaker asks what happens to a vision or hope of a community, when this vision or hope is continuously put off or delayed.

The speaker asks: will that dream wither away and shrivel up like fruit left out in the sun? Or will it putrefy like a painful, infected wound and then leak out pus? Will it smell disgusting, like meat that's gone bad? Or will it become like a gooey candy that gets all crusty and crystallized?

The speaker proposes a fifth possibility: that the unfulfilled dream will simply weigh the dreamers down as they have to continue to bear it.

Finally, the speaker offers a last alternative: maybe the dream will burst outward with energy and potency, demanding to be recognized and accounted for.

the outcome a racist society, hoping to maintain the status quo, might want; such a society wants to see this dream of racial equality lose its bite and scab over.

Each comparison also makes palpable what it might feel like to have a dream that can't be realized because of injustice. These images all imply the cost faced by black people forced to bear this injustice like a painful, infected "sore." Later, the speaker wonders if that dream "just sags / like a heavy load." In other words, maybe this dream of equality just forever weighs on communities like Harlem, dragging them down rather than lifting them up.

But then the speaker proposes an entirely different outcome for this dream, asking, "*Or does it explode?*" This image of explosion brings to mind the Harlem riots of 1935 and 1943. It could also refer to the explosion of the dream itself, in the sense that the American Dream could be "exploded," or shown to be hollow or false. Most importantly, the final question shifts from images of the dream withering away, festering, and sagging—all experiences that would impact those most targeted by injustice—to an image of the dream "explod[ing]" outward. All of society, this final question implies, will have to reckon with the dream, as, in its energy, vitality, and righteousness, it claims its due.

### Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-11



## THEMES



### THE COST OF SOCIAL INJUSTICE

Hughes wrote "Harlem" in 1951, more than a decade before the Civil Rights Act of 1964. He was also writing in the aftermath of the 1935 and 1943 Harlem riots, both of which were triggered by segregation, pervasive unemployment, and police brutality in the black community.

Hughes's poem responds to this context. The title, "Harlem," places the poem in this historically black and immigrant neighborhood in New York City, while the "dream" could be any dream that those in Harlem have had: a dream for a better life, for opportunity, for equality—most broadly, for access to the American Dream itself.

But, as the poem tells readers, this dream has been continuously put off (specifically, by the policies that made black Americans second class citizens). The poem makes it clear, however, that a "dream deferred" by injustice doesn't simply disappear. Instead, that dream must be accounted for sooner or later. Inevitably, the poem suggests, there will be a vast societal reckoning as the dreamers claim what is rightfully their own.

At first, though, the speaker addresses the idea that deferring a dream may lessen the dream itself, making it feel ever more unreachable as it fades away. The poem suggests that the deferred dream could "dry up" or "fester like a sore"; it might "stink like rotten meat ... Or crust and sugar over / like a syrupy sweet." Each of these images suggests something spoiling, losing potency, or outright decaying—which is perhaps exactly



### THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE COMMUNITY

"Harlem" can be read in two ways at once: the deferred dream in the poem can be interpreted as a collective, social dream—the dream of an entire group of people—and it may also be interpreted as an individual dream. In fact, the poem suggests that individual and collective dreams are intricately connected. Ultimately, the poem implies that individual dreams cannot be realized without the realization of the larger, collective dream of equality.

Perhaps most obviously, the poem can be read as being about the deferral of a collective dream. The title, "Harlem," frames the poem as being about the experience of an entire community—that of Harlem. The dream, then, implicitly, is the dream of this neighborhood and group of people. In the poem, the dream is also described with the singular "it," suggesting that the dream is the *same* throughout the poem and that there is one, primary dream continuously at stake. Given the title, this suggests that throughout the poem, the dream described is the dream of Harlem as a whole.

At the same time, however, the poem can be read as about the

deferral of *individual* dreams—that is, the hopes and desires of single people within this community. The poem compares the deferred dream to things that an individual would experience. A “raisin in the sun” is a tiny thing that a single person might observe; similarly, “a sore” is something an individual would endure. An individual might encounter the “stink of rotten meat” or have to bear “a heavy load.” These comparisons suggest that the dream in the poem could be an individual dream, or many individual dreams, and the deferral of these dreams is experienced on a personal, immediate scale.

The use of “a dream” instead of “the dream” further suggests that the dream could be interpreted in different ways, including on the individual level. The word “the” is often used with proper nouns, or to convey something that is singular, public, or widely known. Conversely, “a” suggests that the dream is one of many dreams, not the only one. This supports the idea that the dream could be an individual dream, or one of *many* individual dreams.

The historical context of the poem also supports these two readings. “Harlem” was written in 1951, during the era of Jim Crow segregation and the early period of the Civil Rights Movement. It was also written in the aftermath of World War II, when black Americans fought in the United States military—to defeat Nazism and to defend American visions of equality and liberty— but were forced to do so within segregated ranks. The sense of a collective dream of equality, and the deferral of this dream, was intensely present.

The persistence of systemic racism also meant that many individual dreams of black Americans could not be realized. For example, a black family might dream of buying a home, but racist policies like discriminatory lending practices and redlining made this virtually impossible.

Within this context, many individual dreams could *literally* not be realized without the realization of a larger, *collective* dream of equality and Civil Rights. By making both individual and collective experience present within in the poem, “Harlem” reflects and comments on this reality, suggesting that the deferral of the collective dream of equality is felt and carried on a palpable, human scale.

#### Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-11



## LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

### LINE 1

*What happens to a dream deferred?*

The title and first line of “Harlem” establish the poem’s context and its central question. The title places the poem in a particular location, a historically black American neighborhood

in New York City. In the early 20th century, millions of black Americans migrated from the rural south to urban areas in the midwest, west and north of the country, including Harlem. In the 1910s and 1920s, during and immediately after the Great Migration, the neighborhood became the seat of the Harlem Renaissance, an outpouring of black literature, art, and music that sought to explore and express the experiences of black people in America.

The poem’s title also evokes the racial injustice that inhabitants of Harlem have endured. At the time the poem was written, in 1951, black people had fought for the U.S. military in World War II, yet still faced state-sanctioned racism, segregation, police brutality, pervasive unemployment, and white supremacist violence at home. These conditions led to the Harlem Riots of 1935 and 1943, as well as to the Civil Rights Movement, which was, in the early 1950s, beginning to take stronger shape.

The title works, then, to establish the geographical, political, and cultural context within which the poem’s questions are explored, and its first line understood. This opening line, “What happens to a dream deferred?” is the only line that is completely left-aligned; the rest of the poem is indented. In this way, the formatting connects the poem’s first question to the title, almost as though it is an extension of the title.

The “dream” of the poem’s first question, read within this context, acquires inevitable connotations; from the outset, it is clear that the poem is not just about a personal, individual dream, but about a larger dream of social justice held by those in Harlem who have, for so long, endured inequality.

At the level of language, the opening question is concise and direct, inviting the reader to immediately engage with and try to answer it. In a sense, the question involves and implicates the reader in the problem of what will happen to the dream. This sense of involvement, which is sustained by the questions throughout the poem, connects readers to the dream and to what is at stake, suggesting that the dream is important, not just for the people of Harlem, but for everyone.

The opening line also [juxtaposes](#) the conversational quality of “What happens” with the compression and musical qualities of the phrase “dream deferred.” In this second phrase, the [alliteration](#) of the /d/ sounds and the consonance of the long /e/ sounds (in “dream” and the first syllable of “deferred”) tie the words together, suggesting that the dream is, by default, “deferred” or continuously put off.

Yet this phrase is also, in certain ways, disjunctive. Readers might expect the phrase to read “a dream *that is* deferred,” but in the poem the connecting words (“that” and “is”) are omitted. The shorter /e/ sound in the second syllable of “deferred,” meanwhile, shifts the phrase out of its apparent musical unity.

Finally, “deferred” is not a word usually associated with dreams. “To defer” literally means “to postpone” or “to put off.”

"Deferment" is a word that has been connected with the military draft, including during World War II: someone eligible for a draft deferment would not be drafted or deployed right away.

The word, as it appears here, sounds strangely technical and bureaucratic, contrasting sharply with the visionary, humane idea of a "dream." This disjunction at the level of sound and meaning introduces tension and irresolution at the poem's outset.

## LINES 2-5

*Does it dry ...  
... And then run?*

At the beginning of the second stanza, the speaker introduces the first two of the poem's six possibilities of what might happen to the deferred dream. As with the poem's first line, these possibilities are posed as questions. "Does it dry up / like a raisin in the sun?" the speaker asks. "Or fester like a sore—And then run?"

Where the first, single line stanza—the poem's primary question—stood alone, these lines establish a [rhyme scheme](#), with "sun" in line 3 rhyming with "run" in line 5.

They also set up a [parallel](#) pattern that will repeat once more in this stanza: the first question begins "Does it" while the second begins "Or" and utilizes a dash-line. Each question also uses a comparison in the form of a [simile](#) to suggest the ways the cost of ongoing injustice, through the deferral of the dream of equality, will be felt and experienced.

First, the speaker asks if the dream will "dry up / like a raisin in the sun," suggesting that the dream might shrink or wither away. In the second comparison, the speaker asks if the dream will, instead, "fester like a sore— / And then run," or grow more painful and aggravated before oozing pus.

Meanwhile, these four lines create another pattern at the level of the syllables: line 2 ("Does it dry up") is shorter, with just four syllables. Line 3 ("Like a raisin in the sun?") is longer, with seven. Line 4 ("Or fester like a sore—") has six syllables, while line 5 ("And then run?") has three. Visually and musically, this creates a pattern of short/long/long/short. However, it is worth noting that within this pattern, the lines become consecutively shorter: the poem doesn't allow the reader to relax into an easy or predictable rhythm.

The rhyme, patterning, and variation of these lines creates an almost playful quality that is at sharp odds with the images within them, which are increasingly troubling. A "raisin in the sun" is, in a sense, something that could be encountered in the everyday; yet the "sore," which "fester[s]," rather than being healed, suggests an everyday reality in which something is deeply wrong.

Meanwhile, the poem's use of pattern and variation—especially in the lines becoming increasingly truncated in syllable

length—creates a sense of disjunction and discord. As in the blues and jazz, where musicians might deliberately shift in key or to a major or minor note, these shifts in the poem signal experiences that are fundamentally inharmonic, implying disjunction or tension.

The pattern of these four lines, then, is deceptively simple, as the speaker seems to be exploring alternative answers to the poem's question, while an undercurrent of discord builds.

Finally, it's worth noting that Hughes metaphor of a "raisin in the sun" proved so powerful that Lorraine Hansberry later used it for the title of her now famous play, [A Raisin in the Sun](#).

## LINES 6-8

*Does it stink ...  
... a syrupy sweet?*

Lines 6 to 8 ("Does it stink ... syrupy sweet?") repeat, to some degree, the pattern established by lines 2 to 5. As in lines 2 to 5, lines 6 to 8 pose two questions, each a possible answer to the poem's main question, "What happens to a dream deferred?" Each of these questions, like those earlier in the stanza, use [similes](#), with the first beginning "Does it..." and the second "Or..."

Yet while these lines appear to replicate the pattern established at the beginning of the stanza, they also introduce important changes. The opening questions of the stanza ("Does it dry up ... And then run") extend over four lines, with two lines devoted to each question. Here, the first question of this pair comes in just one line: "Does it stink like rotten meat?" The second is then extended over two: "Or crust and sugar over— / like a syrupy sweet?"

Most notably, these lines change the rhyme scheme established at the beginning of the stanza. Where lines 2 to 5 set up an ABCB rhyme scheme, here, the rhyme scheme shifts to DED: "meat" rhymes with "sweet," but "over" is left without a rhyme. The initial rhyme scheme conveyed some sense of resolution; conversely, these three lines convey irresolution and uncertainty. These shifts in the rhyme scheme, along with the other, subtler shifts in the stanza, create an increasing sense of instability and disjunction in the poem.

At the same time, the possibilities proposed for what happens to the deferred dream—and for how the cost of its deferral will be felt and experienced—become increasingly troubling. The image of "rotten meat" suggests abandonment and decay. It also builds on, and makes even more disturbing, the image of the "fester[ing] ...sore" in lines 4 to 5.

The stanza's final image, of a "syrupy sweet" that "crust[s] and sugar[s] over" is troubling in a different way. This sweet, unlike the sore or rotten meat, is apparently harmless. Yet the description of it as "syrupy" and "crust[ing]" implicitly sustains the image of the sore, as though the poem is describing, not a

“sweet” or piece of candy, but something running from an open wound. This double meaning makes the comparison even more unsettling, as it suggests that the deferred dream, if the deferral goes on long enough, could become harmful in a way that is no longer recognized as harmful.

The image of the sweet as “syrupy” also conveys a sense of sentimentality or cliché, as in a “syrupy” representation of feeling. The poem suggests that the dream, continually put off and unfulfilled, might “fester” or “stink,” but it might also—perhaps even more frighteningly—lose its true nature or recognizability, becoming only a sentimentalized, disposable version of itself.

## LINES 9-11

*Maybe it just ...  
... does it explode?*

The last three lines of “Harlem” (“Maybe ... *explode?*”) continue to ask what will happen to the deferred dream, but with shifts that irrevocably transform the poem’s full meaning. Lines 9 to 10 (“Maybe ... *load.*”) stand alone as an independent [couplet](#). For the first time, here, the poem asks what will happen to the dream, not in the form of an actual question, but in a statement: “Maybe it just sags / like a heavy load,” the speaker says.

Several factors combine to dramatically slow down the poem at this point. First, the space of the stanza break after line 8 (“like a syrupy sweet?”) requires the reader to pause. Also, where stanza two operated through tightly organized questions, propelled forward by the [anaphora](#) of “Does it...” and “Or...,” the shift to “Maybe...” signals a change in the poem’s mode.

Coming as it does after a series of interrogatives, the “Maybe” statement seems to suggest that the speaker is proposing what *will* inevitably happen to the dream, as though the reader has reached the poem’s ending. The similar /a/ sounds of “Maybe” and “sags” also work to elongate the line, enacting that state of bearing a “sag[ging]” burden.

The image here, too, is worth noting. Like the proposed alternatives of what will happen to the dream in stanza two, this possibility is framed as a [simile](#); the deferred dream is compared to a “heavy load.” However, this comparison is different both in sound and meaning from those that came before. Where the comparisons in the second stanza inhabited lines of varying syllabic length, each line of this comparison has five syllables, or beats. This even distribution of syllables contributes to the sense that this is the poem’s inevitable conclusion, and what will inevitably happen to the dream.

Also, while the [images](#) in stanza two are all things that a person might encounter (a raisin, rotten meat, a syrupy sweet) or endure in their body (a sore), this image of “a heavy load” is clearly of something that has been imposed onto the dreamer or dreamers. The image recalls conditions of slavery and forced labor. While a raisin, a sore, rotten meat, and syrupy sweet

could all be endured, however unpleasantly or painfully, the load in this image is clearly far too heavy to bear. The “heavy load” in this couplet, then, feels inevitable and perpetual; but it also, at the same time, feels unsustainable, as the poem implies that something will have to change.

This change comes in the poem’s last line. After a stanza break, this line stands alone, a mirror to the first, stand-alone line of the poem, “What happens to a dream deferred?” “*Or does it explode?*” the speaker asks, and for the first time the speaker seems not to be musing over possible outcomes but telling the reader the poem’s true answer.

The italics of the question set it apart, giving it intensity and a voiced quality. The line’s ending, “explode,” also unexpectedly rhymes with line 10 (“load”), swinging the poem’s emphasis in the penultimate stanza downward and away from the unrhymed “sags.” The deferred dream, the poem suggests through this rhyme arrangement, won’t “sag.” It will burst outward in an explosion that will impact all of society.

Also, and critically, the poem shifts out of its series of similes here. Where similes, as a well-known poetic device, convey a sense of “poem-ness,” the sudden relinquishing of them suggests that the poem has dropped its apparently musing, aestheticized quality to reveal the true energy running through it. The poem, in a sense, explodes its own patterns and habits to show another possibility, and another reality.



## SYMBOLS



### THE DREAM

While “Harlem” uses a series of [similes](#) to describe what might happen to a dream that is continuously put off, the poem’s primary [symbol](#) is the dream itself.

“What happens to a dream deferred?” the speaker asks. The speaker doesn’t go on to define what the dream is or whose dream it is; instead, the poem leaves this implicit and, in some ways, open-ended. The title suggests that the dream is one held by those who live in Harlem, and also perhaps those who live in communities similar to Harlem. Given the historical circumstances of the poem, this means that the dream could be one held by black people and other people of color who have been continuously held down and back by a racist society.

Still, even with this degree of specific interpretation, the dream remains symbolic. It stands, in the poem, for one dream of equality, but also for the many individual dreams held by people who are oppressed. As a symbol, it embodies all of these people’s hopes and expectations and sense of possibility. In a way, then, the symbol allows many different readers to “read themselves” into the poem, as readers identify with the dream and with the frustration of its deferral.

**Where this symbol appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** “dream”

**POETIC DEVICES****ANAPHORA**

[Anaphora](#) works in several ways “Harlem.” First, it provides a recognizable pattern and structure to the speaker’s questions, beginning in stanza 2. “Does it dry up / like a raisin in the sun?” the speaker asks. “Or fester like a sore—And then run?” These opening lines of the stanza establish a pattern that will repeat, with some variation: “Does it stink like rotten meat?” the speaker asks next. “Or crust and sugar over— / like a syrupy sweet?”

Note the words and phrases that repeat anaphorically:

Does it ...  
like ...  
Or ...  
Does it ...  
Or ...  
like ...

The only line in this stanza that does not begin anaphorically is the one exactly at its center, line 5: “And then run?” The stanza, then, creates a highly patterned form for itself. The repeating beginnings of the questions and lines give them energy and momentum, and also make them, in a sense, predictable, creating a kind of deceptive calm.

Importantly, then, “Harlem” also disrupts this predictability by how it changes its own anaphora. Note, for example, how in the second half of the stanza, the order of anaphoric phrases changes, from “like... Or...” to “Or... like.” Stanza three also shifts away from this pattern, though echoes it with the “like” in line 10 (“like a heavy load”). These subtle changes introduce an increasing sense of instability in the poem.

The last line both changes and combines the anaphora that has been introduced up to this point. “*Or does it explode?*” the speaker asks, bringing together the “or” and the “does it” in the second stanza into a single line and a single anaphoric phrase. Here, the tension that has built in the poem up to this point between pattern and variation comes into full awareness, as the poem transforms its own pattern. Like the explosion the poem describes, this transformation may seem sudden or startling, yet the poem has actually been building toward this point all along.

**Where Anaphora appears in the poem:**

- **Line 2:** “Does it”
- **Line 3:** “like”
- **Line 4:** “Or”
- **Line 6:** “Does it”
- **Line 7:** “Or”
- **Line 8:** “like”
- **Line 10:** “like”
- **Line 11:** “Or does it”

**ALLUSION**

While “Harlem” does not make what might be considered typical literary or cultural [allusions](#)—which traditionally would most often be allusions to classical or “high” art—it does allude to historical, cultural, and political contexts that are important to understanding the poem.

The title, specifically, alludes not only to a particular place (Harlem) but to what this place has been and what it has meant. A historically black neighborhood since the Great Migration of the early 20th century, Harlem was the seat of the Harlem Renaissance, a movement of art, music, and literature that prioritized black experience and expression and transformed the American artistic landscape. This movement ended with the onset of the Great Depression but lay part of the groundwork for the Civil Rights Movement, and later, for the Black Arts Movement.

Harlem was also what has been called, at different times, a ghetto. Like all ghettos, the ghetto conditions of the neighborhood were created by racist policies. When black individuals moved to cities in the north, seeking the equality, respect, and opportunity denied to them in the rural south, policies such as [redlining](#) and segregation forced them into poor areas of cities that were abandoned and neglected. There, they were preyed upon by corrupt landlords and faced rampant unemployment and poverty.

Harlem as a place, then, has contained the dual energies of “Harlem” the poem: the dreams of creative vision, possibility, and equality; and the oppressive, deadening structures that have, continuously, kept these dreams from being fulfilled.

The poem also contains a second, more subtle but equally important allusion in the third stanza, with the image of the “heavy load” that the dreamer must bear. While this load could be any heavy burden, it also alludes to the “heavy load” of the legacy of slavery, and of the actual forced labor within slavery. Coming as it does at this point in the poem, the image and allusion highlight the inhumanity and intolerability of constant deferral and injustice.

**Where Allusion appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 9-10:** “ Maybe it just sags / like a heavy load.”

## CONSONANCE

Within "Harlem," [consonance](#) works to unite images and phrases at the level of their sounds. These clusters of consonants also create building blocks from one step of the poem to the next as "Harlem" builds toward its inevitable ending.

The poem's first lines contain the consonance and [alliteration](#) of /d/ sounds, in "dream," "deferred," "does," and "dry." This consonance provides a bridge between the opening, stand-alone line, and the beginning of the second stanza. It also connects the dream and its deferral with one possible consequence of the deferral (the drying up).

At the same time, this cluster of sounds subtly sets the stage for the next cluster. The /r/ in "dry" repeats in the third line with "raisin" and then in the fourth with "fester" and "sore." The /r/ is a guttural sound, and its prevalence throughout the poem suggests that speaker talking through gritted teeth.

At the same time, these lines set up a group of /s/ sounds: "sun," "fester," "sore." The /r/ sound of these last two words recurs in the "run" of line 5. Then, line 6 repeats /s/ and /r/ sounds ("stink," "rotten") while also bringing /t/ sounds into prominence with "stink," "rotten," and meat."

Within each cluster, the grouping of consonant sounds creates an almost claustrophobic feeling, a sense of being overloaded. At the same time, each cluster lays the groundwork for the next, suggesting a subtext of inevitable movement and change.

It's also worth pointing out here how percussive these lines are, with the mixture of /t/ and /k/ sounds, plus the [sibilant](#) /s/ sounds, throughout:

Does it stink like rotten meat?  
Or crust and sugar over—  
like a syrupy sweet?

These sounds making it seem as though the speaker is spitting out these lines with disgust.

### Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "dream," "deferred"
- **Line 2:** "Does," "dry"
- **Line 3:** "raisin," "sun"
- **Line 4:** "fester," "sore"
- **Line 5:** "run"
- **Line 6:** "it," "stink," "like," "rotten," "meat"
- **Line 7:** "Or," "crust," "sugar," "over"
- **Line 8:** "like," "syrupy," "sweet"
- **Line 9:** "just," "sags"
- **Line 10:** "like," "load"
- **Line 11:** "Or," "does," "it," "explode"

## ASSONANCE

[Assonance](#) works in "Harlem" in a similar way to [consonance](#). The poem is very musical, a sense that is supported by its frequent repetition of vowel and consonant sounds.

Nearly every word in lines 2 and 3, for example, is assonant. The short /uh/ of "Does" is echoed by "up" and "sun" (and, depending on how you pronounce it, by "the"); short /ih/ sounds appear in "it," "raisin," and "in"; and the long /i/ pops up in "dry" and "like." Depending on how you read the "a" here, that could also be assonant with the long /ay/ of "raisin" or another of the many /uh/ sounds:

Does it dry up  
like a raisin in the sun?

The tightly clustered quality of this assonance also works to create a sense of limitation and limited possibility at the level of the poem's sounds.

Later, the long /ee/ sounds of "meat" and "sweet" align these images. This suggests that while the images are apparently different (a syrupy sweet might be less obviously harmful than rotten meat), at another level, they are the same, as they both convey the dream losing its true nature.

Assonance also contributes to the poem's [rhyme scheme](#), of course, which is discussed in its own section of this guide.

### Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Does," "it," "dry," "up"
- **Line 3:** "like," "a," "raisin," "in," "the," "sun"
- **Line 5:** "run"
- **Line 6:** "Does," "it," "stink," "meat"
- **Line 8:** "sweet"
- **Line 10:** "load"
- **Line 11:** "explode"

## END-STOPPED LINE

Interestingly, while "Harlem" conveys the intolerable tension of living with a dream that is constantly put off and delayed, the poem uses the apparently even pacing of [end-stopped lines](#) throughout. Seven of the poem's eleven lines end with the end of a sentence, creating a full stop, while other line endings create end-stops and pauses through punctuation (the dash-lines in lines 4 and 7) and the ends of clauses (lines 2 and 9). Why, in conveying the building toward an inevitable explosion, would the poem use such restraint?

In a sense, the restraint of these end stops is not incompatible with, but part of, the poem's sense of inevitability. As the speaker offers each possibility in a paced, even way, the reader too is required to pause and consider what will happen to this dream, to spend more time within each troubling image. Also,

the restraint of the line-endings conveys the restraint of those who have endured this injustice, year after year and generation after generation.

At the same time, any restraint highlights the pressures against it. The end-stopped lines play out against the other notes of the poem: the troubling, dissonant [images](#); the shifts in line length, stanza length, word sounds, and other kinds of patterning; the increasingly intolerable sense of the weight of the dream's deferral. The "explosion" at the poem's ending, then, is all the more looming, all the more real, because it is simply predicted and proposed as an inevitable outcome of limitation and oppression. Its presence is felt, within, against, and through, the poem's calm postulation.

#### Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "deferred?"
- **Line 3:** "sun?"
- **Line 4:** "sore—"
- **Line 5:** "run?"
- **Line 6:** "meat?"
- **Line 7:** "over—"
- **Line 8:** "sweet?"
- **Line 10:** "load."
- **Line 11:** "explode?"

## PARALLELISM

As with other elements of the poem, "Harlem" uses [parallel](#) structures to create a high degree of patterning, and then to diverge from these patterns to make a point. Specifically, two parallel structures appear in the questions of the second stanza:

Does it dry up  
like a raisin in the sun?

Does it stink like rotten meat?

And:

Or fester like a sore  
and then run?

Or crust and sugar over—  
like a syrupy sweet?

The first two examples use the parallel opening of "Does it" before introducing the verb of what the deferred dream might do ("dry up" and "stink"). Each sentence ends with a [simile](#) ("like a raisin in the sun," "like rotten meat"). While syntactically these sentences mirror each other, their arrangement over the line endings does not. That this, the first simile extends over two lines, while the second sentence inhabits a single line. This

subtle shift introduces a sense of divergence, change, and instability into the poem. It also speeds up the poem's pace.

Similarly, the second two examples are both parallel and not. Both begin with "Or" and the apparent parallelism of the verb of what the dream might do ("fester," "crust and sugar over"). Yet the placement of the simile differs from one to the next.

In the first of these questions, the simile ("like a sore") appears immediately after the first verb, "fester." Yet in the next line the reader learns that "fester" was not the only thing the dream might do, as the speaker adds "and then run?" The second of these examples follows more closely the structure of the "Does it..." lines, as the verbs ("crust" and "sugar over") are grouped together before the comparison ("like a syrupy sweet").

The disruption to this parallel structure is important to note. Lines 4-5 ("Or fester like a sore— / And then run?") disrupt the stanza's [anaphoric](#) pattern, as "And" appears for the only time at the beginning of a line. Also, by introducing a second verb, "run," *after* the simile and *after* the line ending, the poem introduces a sense that there are possibilities the reader can't predict.

Furthermore, while the word "run" here applies to the festering sore, it also takes on an inevitable double meaning, as the reader envisions the act of running and movement. This divergence from the parallelism of this stanza, then, predicts the movement, energy and vitality described in the poem's ending.

#### Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- Lines 2-8

## RHETORICAL QUESTION

A [rhetorical question](#) is, traditionally, a question asked for dramatic effect, when the speaker of the question doesn't really expect an answer. Are the questions within "Harlem" rhetorical questions?

Certainly, the questions in the poem work dramatically. They structure the poem, posing different alternatives of what will happen to the dream. They also create a sense of the poem as open-ended. While the ending, "*Or does it explode?*" has a sense of inevitability—one can hear, in the musicality of the poem's closure the impending sense of societal reckoning—the fact that the poem as a whole is framed as questions leaves this ending still in the subjunctive, in the realm of possibility.

Yet while the questions work rhetorically in the poem, enacting the drama and experience of each possibility as it unfolds, they also work to involve and implicate the reader in the poem. The reader might not be expected to answer the poems; yet in a sense the reader is part of a society that must answer *for* them, must inevitably deal with and face them.

In a way, then, the questions hover between rhetorical

questions and genuine questions to the reader, creating an electrical field of simultaneous implication, possibility, and inevitability.

#### Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-8
- Lines 11-11

## SIMILE

Perhaps the most prominent poetic device in “Harlem” is its use of [simile](#). Each possibility of what will happen to the deferred dream—each, that is, until the poem’s last possibility in the last line—is framed as a comparison in the form of a simile. These similes ground the deferred dream in vivid, tangible reality, so that the reader can imagine these possibilities in a more immediate way.

The raisin that dries up in the sun conveys a sense of the dream withering away, losing its potency. The image of a sore that “fester[s]” and “run[s]” suggests an experience that is painful and aggravated. The “stink” of “rotten meat” suggests that the deferral could be a constant, repulsive presence. The “syrupy sweet” is equally repulsive, in a different way, suggesting something that is overly sentimentalized or cliché, and that has lost its true nature.

While each of these similes suggests a clear meaning, a clear reading, they also create a kind of doubling meaning, a kind of turning in on themselves. The “raisin in the sun,” the “sore,” the “rotten meat,” the “syrupy sweet,” the “heavy load”—these are all things that could be encountered in Harlem, especially in the intense heat of a summer day. The similes of what might happen to the dream, then, are in a sense, things that already *are*. Their meanings fold in on themselves as they signify a reality that already exists.

At the same time, certain elements of the images are harder to interpret beyond their physical, felt associations. What would it really mean for a dream to “fester”? The reader can understand the meaning by the immediacy, the felt quality of the image, yet in a way it defies explication.

This unique quality of the similes conveys something important, as the dream becomes, like the things it is compared to, its own felt, real, and embodied existence in the poem that resists a single interpretation. Such a presence can’t be dismissed or explained away, and its “explosion” acquires gravity and physicality.

Importantly, too, at the ending, the poem drops its use of similes: “*Or does it explode?*” is the first possibility proposed that is not framed as a comparison. This could be read as the discarding of an aesthetic, crafted mode, as similes are traditional and common within poetry. As the poem suggests that an explosion, a societal reckoning with the dream, is

inevitable and impending, it also leaves behind its most recognizable aesthetic device. The dream, when it explodes, is comparable to nothing. It is simply itself.

#### Where Simile appears in the poem:

- Lines 2-11

## IMAGERY

The [images](#) within “Harlem”—those that emerge with each consecutive [simile](#)—create a landscape for the poem that conveys its emotional undercurrents. Each is proposed in an apparently musing, calm tone. Yet each image is increasingly troubling and disturbing, suggesting a subtext of instability and building tension.

In the second stanza, the “raisin in the sun” is apparently harmless. Yet the image that follows immediately after, the “sore” that “festers ... And then run[s]” is clearly not. The “rotten meat” that “stinks” implies an environment of abandonment, decay, and neglect, much like the actual living conditions of Harlem where landlords would leave houses and apartments dilapidated and in disrepair.

This image is also even more disturbing since it follows from the image of the “sore,” suggesting that the person bearing the sore has become objectified, dehumanized, like “meat.” The last image of this stanza, the “syrupy sweet,” is apparently less harmful, yet also repulsive, while the detail of the sweet “crust[ing] and sugar[ing] over” implicitly sustains the image of the “sore,” as though what is melting or spilling over is not the substance of the sweet but blood from a wound.

Read together, the images create a web of feeling and physicality where something, it is clear, is urgently in need of care, healing, and attention.

The image in the third stanza, of the deferred dream “sag[ging]/like a heavy load,” sustains this sense of an experience that is becoming intolerable. At the same time, this image differs from the preceding images. For the first time, the poem conveys the deferral not as something that a person might encounter (like the raisin, the meat, or the sweet) or endure within their body (like the sore) but as something that has been imposed onto the dreamer—and that could, implicitly, be shaken off or taken up in a different way.

In contrast to the precise, specific images of the images that came before, the image at the poem’s ending stands apart in its multiple possible imaginings. The possibility of the dream “explod[ing]” brings to mind images of actual explosions. It also conveys images of riots, and specifically the Harlem riots of 1935 and 1943: the reader could envision many different explosions, many meanings of explosions.

Yet one thing is clear: unlike the sore, that would affect one individual dreamer, or the rotten meat, that might affect a

group or community, the explosion at the poem's ending has the potential to impact people well beyond Harlem. At the level of its images, then, the poem suggests that the dream will not merely wither away and harm those most affected by injustice. It will burst outward, demanding to be reckoned with by society as a whole.

#### Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- Lines 2-3
- Lines 4-5
- Line 6
- Lines 7-8
- Lines 9-10
- Line 11

## ENJAMBMENT

As we previously noted in this guide, the vast majority of the poem's lines are strongly [end-stopped](#). Overall, this adds to the poem's calm, measured sense of pace.

Of course, there are also two [enjambments](#) in the poem worth mentioning—between lines 2 and 3 and between lines 9 and 10. Both are evocative of the content of these lines. In line 2, the enjambment after "dry up" perhaps suggests that the line itself as dried up, that its force has simply withered away without even the energy for a comma:

Does it dry up  
like a raisin in the sun?

In line 9, the enjambment after "sags" has a different effect. It's as though the "load" of this deferred dream is so heavy that it "sags" right across the line break:

Maybe it just sags  
like a heavy load.

The enjambment essentially drags line 9 right into line 10, creating a sense of the sheer weight of this load, and how it pulls down on those who must bear it.

All that said, these enjambments are not particularly jarring. Both lines 2 and 9 could be considered complete sentences in their own right, which helps preserve the poem's sense of restriction and control.

#### Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "up / like"
- **Lines 9-10:** "sags / like"



## VOCABULARY

**Harlem** () - Harlem is a neighborhood in New York City, in the northern area of Manhattan, that became known as a predominantly African American community following the Great Migration of the early 20th century. Harlem was the seat of the Harlem Renaissance, a major movement of black art, literature, and culture in the 1910s and 1920s, and has been home to such African American artists, writers, and musicians as Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Paul Robeson, Billie Holiday, and James Baldwin.

**Deferred** (Line 1) - To "defer" means "to postpone" or "to delay." The word "deferral" or "deferment" has been used in connection with the draft; historically, if someone is eligible for a draft deferment, that means that they will not be immediately drafted or deployed. In "Harlem," the word is used in connection with the dream—the dream of equality and of opportunity. With its bureaucratic, technical meaning, "deferred" contrasts strongly with the idea of the dream, in all of its imaginative possibility.

**Fester** (Line 4) - The word "fester" is most commonly used in connection with a wound that has become septic or infected. In other words, it describes a wound that is already painful but that has become worse, often through lack of adequate care. It can also refer to a problem or feeling that has become more painful as a result of indifference. Both meanings are at work in "Harlem." The poem compares the deferred dream to a "sore" that "fester[s]." In doing so it also conveys the experience of living with constant harm that has never been acknowledged or healed.

**Run** (Line 5) - "Run" is used within the poem to describe the "sore" that "fester[s]." Within this simile, the word means "to flow," as in the liquid substance from a sore or wound. At the same time, the word automatically conjures up its most common meaning: to move quickly, to go forward, with energy and momentum. This double meaning exerts itself in the poem. A festering wound is something that is stagnant, still; yet the dream here is also said to "run," a movement brought into full prominence with the explosion in the poem's ending.

**Load** (Line 10) - "Load" as a noun means, literally, whatever is to be carried; a cargo, a substance, a weight. Within the poem, the "heavy load" is depicted as a burden that "sags" over the dreamers. "Load" is also a verb, as in to load someone down, or to load a camera or a gun. This secondary meaning is subtly present in the poem, as this line gives way to the poem's ending, "*Or does it explode?*" where it seems something—perhaps that unbearable burden—has been discharged outward.

**Explode** (Line 11) - "To explode" means to burst outward from internal energy, force, and pressure, as in the explosion of a bomb. This meaning is certainly acutely present in the poem, as the line suggests the accumulating pressure of living in

constant injustice finally bursting outward into the larger society. “To explode” can also mean to disillusion, in the sense of exploding a cultural myth. For example, the poem could be read as asking what happens if the American dream itself “explodes” or is shown to be false or insubstantial, since that dream is only accessible to a small portion of society.



## FORM, METER, & RHYME

### FORM

As a [free verse](#) poem, “Harlem” has no set form. Its 11 lines unfold over four stanzas of very different lengths, adding a sense of unpredictability to the poem. Ultimately, the poem creates its own form, suggesting that those whose dream has been deferred must find their own answer to what will happen to the dream, even if this answer explodes the rules of dominant white society.

The poem uses four stanzas of varying lengths that create a subtle form building towards the poem’s ending. The opening line (“What ... deferred?”) and the last line (“Or ... *explode?*”) are the only single-line stanzas in the poem, mirroring each other.

A close look at the structure of the whole indented part of the poem (from line 2 to the ending) also reveals a kind of form at work. The first four lines of the second stanza (“Does it dry ... And then run?”) create, through their rhyming pattern, a kind of quatrain.

The last three lines of this stanza (“Does it stink ... syrupy sweet?”) are similarly clustered through rhyme. Lines 9 to 10 (“Maybe ... load”) are visually held together by the couplet they inhabit. Line 11 (“Or does it *explode?*”) is then set apart as singular and distinct.

The poem, then, sets up a kind of count-down structure: 4-3-2-1, creating a form that enacts what it describes, as though the speaker is counting down to the explosion.

Finally, the formal elements of “Harlem”—both those that are traditional and those the poem creates—allude to the blues and jazz. These musical forms, which emerged from the black community, use recurring motifs and patterns, but also disrupt these patterns at crucial points to express complex feeling, juxtaposition, and dissonance. “Harlem” creates a similar form, as it explores the dissonant experience of having a dream that is continually oppressed and unfulfilled.

### METER

“Harlem” is a [free verse](#) poem and has no set meter. However, it does use some metrical elements, and it uses elements of rhythm throughout.

Notably, the opening line of the poem is written in [iamb](#)s, poetic feet in which the first syllable is unstressed and the second stressed:

What happens to a dream deferred?

lamb are most famously known as part of iambic pentameter, the metrical form associated with Shakespeare and classical poetry. Here, the speaker asks the poem’s primary, opening question in iambic meter, aligning that question, and the poem, with some of the timeless questions of Shakespeare’s [sonnets](#).

After this moment, the poem shifts into its own rhythms, which enact the rhythms and cadences of jazz music. Jazz, as a form, often takes simple rhythms and interweaves them with complex ones, in which unexpected beats are accented and emphasized. The section of “Harlem” that replies to the opening question—in other words, the whole rest of the poem—does so with jazz rhythm, taking up, and then transforming, the iambs of its opening.

### RHYME SCHEME

“Harlem” has no set, consistent [rhyme scheme](#). Rather, it uses [assonance](#) and rhyming elements throughout to create patterns and then change these patterns, conveying the feeling and meaning of the poem at the level of its music.

After the first, unrhymed line, which poses the primary question of the poem, the second stanza creates a rhyme scheme as it offers a series of possible answers. The ending of line 3 (“sun”) rhymes with the ending of line 5 (“run”). This sets up an ABCB rhyme scheme that might appear in a traditional poem, creating a sense of formal control and resolution.

Importantly, this rhyme scheme appears where the dream is depicted as withering away (“a raisin in the sun”) and growing painful and aggravated (“like a sore”) for the dreamer, but not impacting anyone in the broader society. In a sense, here, the rhyme scheme suggests that the dreamers are simply enduring the deferral of the dream, and “following the rules,” just as the poem “follows the rules” of a conventional rhyme scheme.

Yet the poem goes on to change these rules. After the ABCB pattern opening this second stanza, the poem introduces a group of three lines (“Does it stink ... like a syrupy sweet?”) in which only two lines out of the three rhyme: “meat” rhymes with “sweet,” while “over” is left unrhymed. The images continue, here, to convey a deferred dream that is losing its true power and potency (it is going bad “like rotten meat” and becoming sentimental “like a syrupy sweet”) but the shift in the rhyme scheme introduces a sense of instability, of something left unresolved.

Similarly, but differently, “sags” in line 9 is left unrhymed. The end of line 10, “load,” also appears at first to be unrhymed, since it doesn’t rhyme with the first line of its couplet. The rhyme comes unexpectedly in the poem’s closing question, after the space of a stanza break: “Or does it *explode?*” the speaker asks.

Here, for the first time, two rhyming lines appear consecutively, and the way the poem arrives at this rhyme is radically different

from those that came before. The rhyme bridges two stanzas. And the last line arrives at a completely different possibility for the dream than those proposed up to this point. Here the deferred dream is not imagined as withering away, rotting, or sagging. Instead it is envisioned as bursting outward in its true vitality and power. The final question and rhyme, then, creates an unexpected musical resolution, as the poem suggests that the dream, rather than withering away, will explode outward, demanding to be reckoned with.



## SPEAKER

The speaker of “Harlem” is anonymous and genderless. There is no “I” in the poem, so the reader’s awareness of the speaker comes through the title and the ways the questions in the poem are posed.

The title, “Harlem,” suggests that the speaker might be someone who lives in Harlem, within this neighborhood and community. At the same time, the questions in the poem are posed with a certain amount of distance. For example, the speaker asks, “What happens to a dream deferred?” This question would resonate differently if the speaker asked, “What happens to *our* dream” or “*my* dream.” The speaker seems to be within Harlem, and, at the same time, outside of it or observing it.

Meanwhile, the [tone](#) of the questions for much of the poem is musing, almost detached. The speaker makes a series of comparisons in the second stanza but doesn’t explicitly comment on the feeling or meaning of these comparisons. Instead, the speaker’s thinking and feeling comes through in the building momentum of the questions, the troubling, vivid images, and the shift at the poem’s ending. “*Or does it explode?*” the speaker asks, finally, and the italics give this question a voiced quality, as though it is possible to hear the speaker asking this, with a restrained and precise intensity.

It is clear, through how the poem builds, and through the way this question musically resolves the poem, that this is the true answer to the opening question of what will happen to the dream. The speaker, then, is implicitly one who witnesses the deferral of the dream and all its costs, and who senses the coming explosion.



## SETTING

The setting of “Harlem” is at once highly specific and open-ended. The title locates the poem in a particular place—Harlem, a historically black neighborhood in New York City. The time of the poem’s composition, 1951, lets the reader know the poem’s social and political setting: during segregation, and before the Civil Rights and Voting Rights acts. This context charges the poem’s setting with specific meaning.

At the same time, much of the poem can be read in a more open-ended way. Harlem as a neighborhood is not mentioned within the poem’s lines. Rather, the [images](#) in the poem establish an emotional, implicit setting. The image of a raisin that has dried up conveys a sense of abandonment. The sore, too, suggests abandonment and decay, a lack of care. The rotten meat and syrupy sweet also convey neglect.

Many of the images also subtly convey almost intolerable heat: the sun which dries the raisin up; the “stink” of rotting meat; the sweet that “crust[s] and sugar[s] over” as though it has melted and then crystallized. Within this imagery, the poem also envisions “a heavy load,” which feels even heavier, harder to bear, in such an environment.

These images can be read as conveying the intolerable feeling of living in ongoing conditions of injustice, and ongoing conditions of poverty, where one’s neighborhood is left neglected and uncared for, and where the heat of disappointment, frustration, and anger continues to build. These experiences could be shared by many people in neighborhoods similar to Harlem. The setting of the poem, then, is specific, but also suggests that Harlem is not merely a single place, but also a set of shared experiences.



## CONTEXT

### LITERARY CONTEXT

“Harlem” was written during the time period following the Harlem Renaissance of the 1910s and 1920s, an outpouring of literature, art, and music from the black community in Harlem. Langston Hughes was a leader in this movement, which sought to explore and center black experiences and formulate a distinctly black aesthetic, rather than following white models and norms.

In his seminal 1926 essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” Hughes described the challenges facing black artists, who were fetishized and exoticized by white society on the one hand and dismissed and silenced on the other. Hughes argued that black artists must embrace their culture as a source of true creativity and beauty.

“If white people are pleased, we are glad,” Hughes wrote. “If they are not, it doesn’t matter ... If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn’t matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves.”

While the Harlem Renaissance is considered to have ended with the onset of the Great Depression in the late 1920s, it lay the groundwork for the Civil Rights Movement, and later for the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. When Hughes wrote “Harlem” in 1951, he did so consistently with the

values he had laid out in his essay nearly 30 years before.

He wrote the poem as part of a longer work, *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, a book length sequence that Hughes also envisioned being read as a single long poem. The poems in the book are inspired by the black musical forms of jazz and the blues, and the book as a whole explores the experiences, culture, and racial consciousness of the community of Harlem. The “dream deferred” is a recurrent motif in the book, as the poems consider the human cost of ongoing injustice.

As an individual poem, “Harlem” inspired numerous well-known works that came later. Notably, the poem gave the title to the 1959 play by Lorraine Hansberry, “[A Raisin in the Sun](#),” which tells the story of a black family’s experiences in the South Side of Chicago as they attempt to overcome poverty and segregation. The opening line of “Harlem” also inspired the famous refrain of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s 1963 “I have a dream” speech.

Today, “Harlem” continues to exert its relevance, as the issues the poem speaks to—including ongoing racism and police brutality—remain acutely present in many communities and throughout the United States.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The historical context of “Harlem” is interwoven with its literary context and is deeply important to understanding the poem. This historical context involves the history of Harlem itself.

During the Great Migration in the early twentieth century, more than six million African Americans moved from the rural South to cities in the midwestern, western, and northern United States. There, a combination of state-sanctioned racism—including [redlining](#) and segregation—and white supremacist violence forced black people into poor sections of cities where they faced rampant unemployment and unfair rents.

Harlem was one such neighborhood that came to be known as a ghetto, entrapping the people who lived there within cycles of poverty. These conditions led to the Harlem riots of 1935 and 1943, both of which were also triggered by instances of violence against African Americans; the 1943 riot began after a white police officer shot and wounded a black soldier.

By the time the poem was written, in 1951, black people had fought for the U.S. military in World War II to defeat fascism and defend American visions of freedom and equality. Yet these soldiers were forced to fight within segregated ranks, and at home all black Americans continued to endure legal and extralegal racism and violence.

The dream of racial equality and equal opportunity, briefly glimpsed during the period following the U.S. Civil War, had been continuously put off and delayed. This sense of deferral, and the need to demand justice and equality, led to the Civil Rights Movement. In a sense, Hughes’s poem envisions and

predicts the energy and power of this movement, as it envisions the dream “explod[ing]” and demanding to be accounted for.



## MORE RESOURCES

### EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [An Essay From the Poetry Foundation](#) — Read more about “Harlem” in this essay by Scott Challener at the Poetry Foundation. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/150907/langston-hughes-harlem>)
- [Letter from Martin Luther King, Jr. to Hughes](#) — Read a letter from Martin Luther King, Jr. to Langston Hughes, which includes a reference to a performance of Lorraine Hansberry’s play “A Raisin in the Sun.” (<https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/langston-hughes-0>)
- ["Harlem" Read Aloud by Langston Hughes](#) — Listen to Langston Hughes read “Harlem.” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=79YjXKYeWCK>)
- [Full Text of "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain"](#) — Read Langston Hughes’s 1926 essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain.” (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69395/the-negro-artist-and-the-racial-mountain>)
- [The Harlem Renaissance](#) — Learn more about the Harlem Renaissance from the History Channel. (<https://www.history.com/topics/roaring-twenties/harlem-renaissance>)
- [Langston Hughes and Martin Luther King, Jr.](#) — Read about how Langston Hughes influenced Martin Luther King, Jr., including the influence of “Harlem.” (<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/how-langston-hughess-dreams-inspired-mlks-180961929/>)

### LITCHARTS ON OTHER LANGSTON HUGHES POEMS

- [I, Too](#)
- [Let America Be America Again](#)
- [Mother to Son](#)
- [The Ballad of the Landlord](#)
- [Theme for English B](#)
- [The Negro Speaks of Rivers](#)
- [The Weary Blues](#)



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