Night Funeral in Harlem

SUMMARY

The speaker says that there was a nighttime funeral in the Harlem neighborhood of New York City, before wondering how the attendees could have afforded two fancy cars for the funeral procession.

The boy who died hadn't been able to pay his insurance, which had expired only a few days before. And yet, the funeral attendees obtained a satin-lined coffin for the boy's body to rest in.

The speaker says again that there was a nighttime funeral in Harlem, and then wonders who sent over a flower arrangement.

The dead boy's friends were the ones who brought those flowers, the speaker continues, adding that those same friends will also someday want flowers at their own funerals.

For the third time, the speaker says that there was a nighttime funeral in Harlem. The speaker then wonders who delivered the boy's funereal sermon.

It was an old preacher, the speaker continues, who charged the dead boy's girlfriend five dollars to deliver the sermon.

The speaker says again that there was a nighttime funeral in Harlem.

And when the funeral ended, the coffin's lid was closed over the boy's body, the organ music stopped, and people finished praying. Six people carried away the dead boy in his coffin, and the big, black hearse drove quickly down Lenox Avenue. And after all this, the streetlight on the corner glimmered like a teardrop. That's because the dead boy was so deeply loved by those friends who brought the flowers and the girlfriend who paid for the preacher's services. The grief of all those people who loved the boy is what made his funeral so impressive.

Again, the speaker says that there was a nighttime funeral in Harlem.

THEMES

LOVE AND COMMUNITY AS A FORM OF WEALTH

"Night Funeral in Harlem" depicts the funeral of a young Black man who died in poverty. While this "poor boy" didn't leave much money behind, his community covered all his funeral expenses; the people who loved him pay for his coffin, flower arrangements, and a preacher. Despite this generosity, the speaker declares that these things aren't what made the man's funeral "grand." Instead, his funeral was special because he was deeply loved and thus genuinely grieved by those who knew him. In this way, the poem suggests that love, community, and relationships are more meaningful than material wealth.

Even though the boy died so poor that his "insurance lapsed," his funeral wasn't lacking in any way because his community came together to cover the expenses. The speaker says that the people who loved the boy provided "two fine cars" for the funeral procession and "a satin box" (i.e., a satin-lined coffin) "for his head to lay." His friends paid for the flowers, and his girlfriend paid the preacher to "preach that boy away." By coming together, his community was able to ensure the boy's passage was honored with all the usual formality associated with a funeral.

But these material things weren't what make the funeral special. The love people had for the boy, and the grief they thus felt at his passing, was what infused the ceremony with real meaning. It was "all their tears that made / That poor boy's / Funeral grand," the speaker says. In other words, his funeral stands out not because it was exceptionally luxurious, but because it was attended by people who deeply cared for the boy. The beauty of the boy's funeral is a testament to the relationship he had with other people while he was alive. No amount of money, the poem thus implies, can make people feel true grief when a person dies—only love can do that.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-45

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

Night funeral ...
... two fine cars?

The poem begins with a pair of two-line stanzas in which an omniscient speaker describes a "Night funeral / in Harlem." These words will be repeated over and over throughout the poem, becoming a refrain—and making it clear that Harlem, a predominantly Black neighborhood in New York famous for its rich culture, is itself a central character here.

The use of this refrain gives the poem a songlike quality. In fact, *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, the collection in which this poem was originally published, intentionally borrowed many different elements from popular Black musical traditions; Hughes wrote about wanting to imitate the "conflicting changes, sudden nuances, sharp and impudent interjections, [and] broken

rhythms" of Black music. The poem's sounds suggest that the poem is not just depicting a funeral, but also expressing an even bigger grief—that it's not just abbout sorrow over the death of an individual Black man, but sorrow over the awful, oppressive conditions under which Black people lived.

The speaker goes on to ask, "Where did they get / Them two fine cars?" This rhetorical question isn't really the speaker's own; rather, the speaker is voicing a question that might occur to a passing outsider and preparing to answer it. The answer will reveal a lot about the loving community this poem depicts.

LINES 5-8

Insurance man, he ...
... head to lay.

After the stanza break, the speaker answers the rhetorical question of lines 3-4: wherever "Them two fine cars" came from, the speaker says, they weren't paid for by the boy's insurance, because the boy's "insurance lapsed the other day." In other words, his insurance stopped because he couldn't pay for it. Despite the boy's lack of money, however, his body now rests in an elegant "satin box" (or coffin) purchased by his family and friends.

In other words, this boy's community has come together to care for him after his death. The official world of the "insurance man" has no kindness to offer those whose poverty stops them from keeping up with their payments. Rather, it's the people who loved the dead boy who scrape together the money to send him off in style.

Note how different the third stanza is from the first two. While the first two stanzas were both two lines long, the third stanza is made up of four longer lines. It also rhymes:

> Insurance man, he did not **pay**—
> His insurance lapsed the other **day**—
> Yet they got a satin box
> for his head to **lay**.

The end rhyme in these lines, and the movement from shorter to longer lines, mimics the musicality and syncopation of jazz improvisation. This poem doesn't just describe Harlem and its community, it *sounds* like Harlem.

LINES 9-12

Night funeral ...
... wreath of flowers?

Lines 9-12 return to the form of lines 1-4. The speaker repeats the refrain, "Night funeral / In Harlem," once again reminding the reader of the poem's setting. While anyone can relate to the idea of a funeral, Hughes isn't portraying just any funeral, or any community: he's specifically interested in the way that the people of Harlem come together to honor their dead, even in the face of poverty.

The speaker again follows the refrain with a question. This time, the speaker rhetorically asks, "Who was it sent / That wreath of flowers?" The question draws attention to the community that has shown up to grieve the dead boy. Though this boy died penniless and young, he is not unmourned.

Flowers can be used to symbolize a great many things, but at funerals—and in this poem—they are a symbol of love and respect for the dead. That the flowers are a "wreath" rather than loose stems or even a bouquet seems to suggest that whoever sent these flowers put thought and care into the arrangement. A wreath is also circular, adding to the symbolism of love and community: in a wreath, all the flowers are intertwined and connected.

LINES 13-18

Them flowers came ...
... in Harlem:

Again, the speaker again answers a question from the previous lines, now saying that the "wreath of flowers" was sent by "that poor boy's friends." Notice the use of the word "poor," which can mean both "unfortunate" and "impoverished"—and certainly has both of those meanings here. Though the poem never describes how the boy died, the very fact that he was only a "boy" suggests that he met a sad end—perhaps through illness or violence. And if he couldn't keep up with his life insurance payments, he probably didn't have much cash to spare. Yet despite the boy's bad luck and poverty, he was clearly not without love: his friends mourn his death and bring flowers to honor his life.

These friends, the speaker observes, will "want flowers, too, / When they meet their ends." This isn't to say that they want their own coffins to be heaped with beautiful flowers so much as they want what those flowers symbolize: the love and respect of their community. They, too, hope to be genuinely grieved when their time comes. In this way, the poem makes an argument for the value of community. Whatever else the dead boy was or might have been, he was one of these people. One of their own. Beloved.

Notice the way diacope and alliteration add rhythm to these lines:

> Them **flowers** came
> from that poor boy's **f**riends—
> They'll want **flowers**, too,
> When they meet their ends.

Both diacope and alliteration connect this stanza to the stanza before it, which also contains the word "flowers" and /f/ alliteration ("**f**uneral, "**f**lowers"). These repetitions create some musical continuity in the poem.

The poem again repeats its refrain in lines 17-18 ("Night funeral / in Harlem"). The consistency and predictability of this

refrain perhaps suggest that this event—the late-night funeral of a young, impoverished Black person—is an all-too-ordinary scene in the mostly Black neighborhood of Harlem. The repetition, then, draws attention not only to this specific occurrence, but to the dire conditions Black residents of New York City endured at the time this poem was written.

LINES 19-24

Who preached that ...
... had to pay.

The refrain in lines 17-18 is once again followed by aporia in lines 19-22 as the speaker asks and answers a question about who conducted the funeral services. Notice the use of polyptoton in these lines:

> Who **preached** that
> Black boy to his grave?
> Old **preacher** man
> **Preached** that boy away—

The repetition of "preached"/"preacher" contributes to the musical rhythm of these lines, as does the /ay/ assonance that connects "grave" in line 20 to the end rhyme between "away" and "pay" in lines 22 and 24. And the /b/ alliteration in "Black boy" adds emphasis to this reminder of who the funeral is for and who this poem is about.

The rhythmic question/answer form here also evokes old call-and-response songs. In borrowing from both historical and contemporary Black musical traditions, Hughes firmly grounds this poem, not just in Harlem culture, but in a deeper Black tradition.

The speaker goes on to say that the boy's girlfriend is the one who hired the preacher. He was loved not only by his friends, then, but also by a significant other. In this way, the poem continues to reveal just how many people have been hurt by this boy's death.

And the capitalization of the "Five Dollars" the boy's girlfriend had to scrape together for the preacher's fee suggests that this was a pretty substantial sum of money, not something to be taken lightly. Again, the boy's struggling community is willing to make real sacrifices to show their love for him.

LINES 25-30

Night funeral ...
... prayers been said

Lines 25-26 repeat the poem's refrain, but the following stanza shifts the poem's form. Rather than another two-line question followed by a four-line response, the refrain is followed by one long stanza, which begins with the lines:

> When it was all over
> **And the** lid shut on his head
> **and the** organ had done played
> **and the** last prayers been said

The anaphora here builds momentum, giving these lines a new speed and intensity. The quick movement between descriptions might make readers think of a movie montage, a technique in which a filmmaker edits together clips from different scenes to create a fluid whole. This poem was published in a book called *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, so the effect feels especially significant. This cinematic technique lends importance and drama to a scene that would never have been depicted in the movies being produced at the time the poem was published: a scene depicting the real lives of Black people.

These lines also contain alliteration: the /p/ sounds in "played" and "prayers" (as well as in "pallbearers" in line 31) have a rhythmic effect, as does the ABCB rhyme scheme of lines 27-30. All of this rhythm moves the poem forward more quickly, just as a movie montage conveys a lot of visual information in a short amount of time.

LINES 31-34

and six pallbearers ...
... hearse done sped,

Both the anaphora and the ABCB rhyme scheme carry on through lines 31-34:

> **and** six pallbearers
> Carried him out for dead
> **And** off down Lenox Avenue
> That long black hearse done sped,

Because there is no stanza break to interrupt the poem's momentum, and because lines 27-34 are all enjambed, the poem picks up speed and intensity. The end-stop in line 34 is thus surprising: the poem steps on the brakes just as it acknowledges its own speed with the image of the "long black hearse" rushing away "down Lenox Avenue."

Notice, too, the use of colloquial diction—in particular, African American Vernacular English, or AAVE. This can be seen in phrases such as "That long black hearse done sped," "and the organ had done played," and "them two fine cars." By using the actual speech patterns of ordinary Black people at the time (as opposed to more affluent Black people, many of whom would have adopted mainstream English vernacular in order to fit in and succeed in white spaces), Hughes pays respect to the people he is portraying, suggesting that their lives, language, and traditions are important and meaningful.

LINES 35-40

The street light ...
... the preacher man—

Though lines 27-40 are all one long stanza, the poet indicates a shift in tone by introducing indented lines, starting in line 35. The shift coincides both with the sudden disappearance of the rhyme scheme and with a slower pace as the poem reaches its emotional climax.

Lines 35-37 contain a single, vivid simile:

> The street light
> At his corner
> Shined just like a tear—

This simile compares the "street light" shining down on the boy's grave to "a tear"—as if the city itself were mourning the boy's death. This simile is all the more poignant due to the poem's overall lack of figurative language: the poem is too matter-of-fact and grounded in the real world to spend much time on comparisons. This lone simile infuses the moment with emotion.

Immediately after the simile, the speaker says with utmost vulnerability:

> [...] That boy that they was mournin'
> Was so dear, so dear

The epizeuxis here slows the poem down, emphasizing just how much the boy was loved. For just a moment, this is the only thing that matters. The internal rhyme between "tear" and "dear" feels somehow more striking than the end rhymes present throughout most of the poem, perhaps in part because those end rhymes are absent in these lines, making this lone rhyme stand out.

LINES 41-45

> *It was all ...*
> *... In Harlem.*

The speaker concludes that, after all, it wasn't the "fine cars" or the "satin box" or the "wreath of flowers" that made "That poor boy's / Funeral grand," but the "tears" of those who loved him. In other words, no amount of material wealth can confer beauty and dignity on someone who has died; only the love of those who knew them can do that. In this way, the poem suggests that love and community are a kind of prosperity far more lasting and meaningful than mere monetary wealth.

Notice, too, the juxtaposition in the final lines of stanza 11:

> It was all their tears that made
> That poor boy's
> Funeral grand.

The boy is described as "poor" because he had no money to speak of, yet his funeral is "grand"—impressive, magnificent, inspiring. That is to say, material success isn't the only measure of a person's life. The people of Harlem that this poem describes might not have much money, but they have a "wealth" of love and connection.

The poem ends with the same two lines with which it began: "Night funeral / In Harlem." When all is said and done, the poet wants the reader to understand that this scene belongs to a certain time and place. The refrain could even be interpreted as a dirge for Harlem itself—or for its golden days, anyway, when the city was a shining beacon of Black culture and creativity.

SYMBOLS

FLOWERS

Flowers can represent many different things; depending on the occasion, they can be used to express love, sympathy, celebration, or grief. In this poem, they more specifically symbolize the love and respect of the boy's friends, who wished to honor his passing. The flowers are a material expression of the fact that this boy was "so dear" to those who knew him—a physical marker of his connection to his community.

Thus, when the speaker says that these friends will "want flowers, too, / When they meet their ends," the speaker isn't implying that these friends care deeply about having pretty flowers next to their coffins. Instead, the speaker is saying that these friends hope that their bond with the community is similarly strong—that others will mourn *them* in the way they've mourned this boy.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 11-16:** "Who was it sent / That wreath of flowers? / Them flowers came / from that poor boy's friends— / They'll want flowers, too, / When they meet their ends."
- **Lines 37-39:** " That boy that they was mournin' / Was so dear, so dear / To them folks that brought the flowers,"

POETIC DEVICES

REPETITION

The poem uses several different kinds of repetition to create emphasis and feeling.

The most obvious form of repetition is the refrain "Night funeral / In Harlem," which appears at the beginning of the poem and then repeats throughout. This particular repetition reminds the reader that this isn't just *any* funeral, but a funeral happening in *Harlem*. When this poem was written, Harlem was known for being the center of Black intellectual and cultural life. It was a predominantly Black area of New York City, and

the poem is an homage to a particularly Black experience. The repetition of the refrain might even suggest that this funeral for a young, penniless, and beloved Black person is an all-too-familiar event.

The poem also uses diacope, such as in lines 11-16, with the repetition of "flowers":

> Who was it sent
> That wreath of **flowers**?
> Them **flowers** came
> from that poor boy's friends—
> They'll want **flowers**, too,
> When they meet their ends.

Here, repetition draws attention to a particular word, which in this case acts as a symbol for the love and respect the dead boy's friends feel for him.

Lines 19-22 use polyptoton to similar effect:

> Who **preached** that
> Black boy to his grave?
> Old **preacher** man
> **Preached** that boy away—

Here, repetitions create an effect almost like a folksong, evoking a sense of tradition and community.

The poem also uses epizeuxis in line 38 with the repetition of "so dear, so dear." The repetition here has an emotional impact; the emphasis on how much the boy was loved takes precedence over everything else going on in the poem for just a moment, alerting the reader that what all these funereal traditions really come down to is love for the deceased.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "Night funeral / In Harlem:"
- **Line 5:** "Insurance"
- **Line 6:** "insurance"
- **Lines 9-10:** "Night funeral / In Harlem:"
- **Line 12:** "flowers"
- **Line 13:** "flowers"
- **Line 15:** "flowers"
- **Lines 17-18:** "Night funeral / in Harlem:"
- **Line 19:** "preached"
- **Line 21:** "preacher"
- **Line 22:** "Preached"
- **Lines 25-26:** "Night funeral / In Harlem:"
- **Line 38:** "so dear, so dear"
- **Lines 44-45:** "Night funeral / In Harlem."

ANAPHORA

Anaphora is one of the poem's most prominent forms of repetition. Take a look at lines 27-34:

> When it was all over
> **And the** lid shut on his head
> **and the** organ had done played
> **and the** last prayers been said
> **and** six pallbearers
> Carried him out for dead
> **And** off down Lenox Avenue
> That long black hearse done sped

The anaphora here has a propulsive effect, speeding the poem up as the speaker lists a number of things that occurred after the funeral. This momentum helps the poem to build up to its emotional climax, which arrives just after the previous lines:

> The street light
> At his corner
> Shined just like a tear— That boy that they was mournin'
> Was so dear, so dear

Part of what makes this moment feel so moving is that the rhythm from the previous lines breaks down: the reader can't help but feel the sudden absence of anaphora (and the change in end rhymes), adding a visceral dimension to the idea of the love these people had for this boy.

There is also anaphora in lines 39-40:

> **To** them folks that brought the flowers,
> **To** that girl who paid the preacher man—

The repetition of "to" signals that the speaker is again listing things (this time the people who loved the boy), but the list gets interrupted with an em dash. It seems the speaker breaks off mid-thought, and rather than continuing to list all the countless people who loved the boy, gets right to the point: that "It was all their tears that made / That poor boy's / Funeral grand."

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 28:** "And the"
- **Line 29:** "and the"
- **Line 30:** "and the"
- **Line 31:** "and"
- **Line 33:** "And"
- **Line 39:** "To"
- **Line 40:** "To"

SIMILE

For the most part, this poem doesn't use figurative language, sticking to simple, sorrowful declarations of fact: "the lid shut on his head," "his insurance lapsed the other day." That makes it

all the more striking when the speaker uses a single vivid simile in line 37:

> The street light
> At his corner
> Shined just like a tear— [...]

The speaker's choice to use a simile here, and here alone, demands that readers stop in their tracks to imagine the scene. In this image, the world itself seems to be grieving for the boy—or at least, so it seems to the people who loved him and now must begin a new chapter of their lives without him. It's as if, after all the action of the funeral (described rapidly in lines 27-34), the mourners finally get a moment to take a breath and see their own grief reflected in the world around them. Readers might imagine, for instance, the boy's mournful girlfriend looking up at that street light through her own tears.

This lone simile thus concentrates all the poem's love and grief in one image. The poem doesn't need to use a lot of figurative language to bring the poem's world to life; the speaker's choice to use only this single simile gives this moment extra weight and poignancy.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 35-37:** "The street light / At his corner / Shined just like a tear—"

ALLITERATION

Subtle alliteration appears throughout the middle of the poem. For example, take a look at the /f/ alliteration spread across lines 9-17:

> Night funeral
> In Harlem:
> Who was it sent
> That wreath of flowers?
> Them flowers came
> from that poor boy's friends—
> They'll want flowers, too,
> When they meet their ends.
> Night funeral

Note how spread out the alliteration is. These /f/ sounds don't fall close enough together to add a huge amount of intensity, but they do emphasize certain words: "funeral," "flowers," "friends." These alliterative words end up standing out, so that even though the poem describes poverty and death, what feels more important in these lines is the love the boy's friends have for him.

In line 20, /b/ alliteration ("Black boy") emphasizes *who* this funeral is for. It matters that this poem is about a "Black boy." All too often in a racist society, Black people aren't treated as fully human. The occurrence of a funeral insists otherwise. This boy was loved. Now he is grieved.

There is also /p/ alliteration in lines 29-31 ("played," "prayers," "pallbearers") and line 40 ("paid the preacher"). This alliteration adds to the momentum of this part of the poem, which seems to move more quickly than the rest as it rushes toward its emotional conclusion.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "funeral"
- **Line 12:** "flowers"
- **Line 13:** "flowers"
- **Line 14:** "friends"
- **Line 15:** "flowers"
- **Line 17:** "funeral"
- **Line 20:** "Black," "boy"
- **Line 23:** "Five"
- **Line 24:** "friend"
- **Line 25:** "funeral"
- **Line 29:** "played"
- **Line 30:** "prayers"
- **Line 31:** "pallbearers"
- **Line 39:** "folks," "flowers"
- **Line 40:** "paid," "preacher"

ENJAMBMENT

The poem uses a mix of enjambed and end-stopped lines. For example, the first four lines go back and forth between being enjambed and end-stopped:

> Night funeral
> In Harlem:
> Where did they get
> Them two fine cars?

This alternation creates a stop-and-start momentum that almost feels like a funeral procession.

For the most part, the poem maintains this balance between enjambed and end-stopped lines. It is only towards the end of the poem (when the overall form of the poem changes from a pattern of short, rhyming stanzas to one long stanza) that the balance shifts in favor of enjambment. Take a look at lines 27-34:

> When it was all over
> And the lid shut on his head
> and the organ had done played
> and the last prayers been said
> and six pallbearers
> Carried him out for dead

And off down Lenox Avenue
That long black hearse done sped,

Notice how having a lot of enjambed lines in a row hurries the poem along. The speaker is listing a number of things that are happening in quick succession, and enjambment (along with anaphora and a single, propulsive end rhyme) gives the passage its speed.

But enjambment works a little differently in lines 35-39:

The street light
At his corner
Shined just like a tear— That boy that they was mournin'
Was so dear, so dear
To them folks that brought the flowers

Here, the lines are broken more dynamically; the short line "At his corner" is immediately followed by the poem's longest line. Enjambment makes the movement between these short and long lines feel smooth and gentle, reflecting both the sorrow and the love on display in these lines.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "funeral / In"
- **Lines 3-4:** "get / Them"
- **Lines 7-8:** "box / for"
- **Lines 9-10:** "funeral / In"
- **Lines 11-12:** "sent / That"
- **Lines 13-14:** "came / from"
- **Lines 17-18:** "funeral / in"
- **Lines 19-20:** "that / Black"
- **Lines 21-22:** "man / Preached"
- **Lines 23-24:** "Dollars / His"
- **Lines 25-26:** "funeral / In"
- **Lines 27-28:** "over / And"
- **Lines 28-29:** "head / and"
- **Lines 29-30:** "played / and"
- **Lines 30-31:** "said / and"
- **Lines 31-32:** "pallbearers / Carried"
- **Lines 32-33:** "dead / And"
- **Lines 33-34:** "Avenue / That"
- **Lines 35-36:** "ight / At"
- **Lines 36-37:** "corner / Shined"
- **Lines 37-38:** "mournin' / Was"
- **Lines 38-39:** "dear / To"
- **Lines 41-42:** "made / That"
- **Lines 42-43:** "boy's / Funeral"
- **Lines 44-45:** "funeral / In"

APORIA

The first half of the poem uses aporia several times, creating a call-and-response feeling that suggests this funeral is one of many like it in Harlem. Each question the speaker raises about how the boy's funeral was paid for gets the same touching answer: a member of his community.

In lines 3-4, the speaker asks "Where did they get / Them two fine cars?" The speaker then immediately responds to their own question by saying:

Insurance man, he did not pay—
His insurance lapsed the other day—

While the speaker doesn't exactly provide a *straightforward* answer to their own question, the implication is that the cars *weren't* paid for by the dead boy's insurance. So wherever the cars came from, they had to have been paid for by somebody else.

The poem goes on to repeat this question-and-answer formula two more times. In lines 11-12, the speaker asks, "Who was it sent / That wreath of flowers?" The speaker actually knows the answer to this question, and immediately reveals it, saying "Them flowers came / from that poor boy's friends." By posing a question they already know the answer to, the speaker is able to make a point: that the flowers are only there because the boy's friends wanted to honor him and express their love. They aren't just there because some insurance policy covered the cost of them.

Then the speaker asks, "Who preached that / Black boy to his grave?" Again, the speaker provides an immediate answer to their own question, saying:

Old preacher man
Preached that boy away—
Charged Five Dollars
His girl friend had to pay.

Here, the poem uses aporia in a more roundabout way. The immediate answer—that the "Old preacher man" is the one who "preached that / Black boy to his grave" isn't really a very specific answer, nor is it the point. The point comes after, when the speaker says that the dead boy's girlfriend had to pay the preacher for his services. In other words, the sermon was delivered because this girl loved the boy and wanted to make sure he got a proper send-off.

Aporia thus suggests that Harlem's "answer" to poverty and suffering is community and love.

Where Aporia appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-6:** "Where did they get / Them two fine cars? / Insurance man, he did not pay— / His insurance lapsed the other day—"
- **Lines 11-14:** "Who was it sent / That wreath of flowers?

/ Them flowers came / from that poor boy's friends—"
- **Lines 19-22:** "Who preached that / Black boy to his grave? / Old preacher man / Preached that boy away—"

VOCABULARY

Lapsed (Line 6) - Expired.

Satin box (Lines 7-8) - A coffin.

Organ (Line 29) - A keyboard musical instrument often uses in churches and religious ceremonies.

Pallbearers (Lines 31-32) - The people carrying the coffin at a funeral.

Hearse (Line 34) - A car used to transport a coffin.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

The poem is made up of 45 lines divided into 12 stanzas of varying lengths. Lines 1-26 follow a noticeable pattern: two indented two-line stanzas followed by a quatrain (or four-line stanza). The indented stanzas always include the refrain "Night funeral / In Harlem," giving the poem a songlike structure. In fact, all of the poems published alongside this one in *Montage of a Dream Deferred* borrowed elements from popular Black American music.

The poem's call-and-response form, in which the speaker poses and then answers questions, similarly draws on Black musical history. Many African tribes relied on songs to pass along history and knowledge, and when people from these tribes were enslaved by colonizers and brought to the Americas, they brought their oral traditions with them. Over time these traditions morphed into any number of musical genres, including jazz, blues, soul, gospel, and be-bop.

Halfway through the poem (after line 26), the form changes rather abruptly; stanza 11 is long, and its lines vary greatly in length. Visually, it is less organized and even its rhythms are different. The sudden change in form seems to suggest that, though the rituals of the funeral comfort the people in the community, the mourners will still eventually be left with their uncontrollable grief.

METER

The poem is written in free verse, so it doesn't follow a specific metrical pattern. Instead, the poet achieves rhythm through other means: varying line lengths, enjambment, and repetition, for example. Throughout roughly the first half of the poem (lines 1-26), for example, Hughes uses a refrain ("Night Funeral / In Harlem") to give the poem a somber rhythm, fitting for a funeral. The predictable pattern that he sets up—the refrain, a two-line question, and a four-line answer—might evoke the old rituals of a funeral procession. At the same time, the lack of meter makes the poem feel more intimate, personal, and informal.

RHYME SCHEME

As a free verse poem, "Night Funeral in Harlem" doesn't follow a single, overarching rhyme scheme. As with the poem's lack of meter, this keeps things from feeling too strict or formal.

That said, there are some moments of rhyme in the poem. For example, each of the poem's quatrains (or four-line stanzas) use end rhyme. The first, stanza 3 ("Insurance man [...] his head to lay"), follows an AABA pattern, while stanzas 6 ("Them flowers [...] their ends") and 9 ("Old preacher [...] had to pay") both follow an ABCB pattern. These rhyming passages feel musical without feeling too rigid or formal, perhaps suggesting the tenderness with which the community comes together for the boy's funeral rituals.

SPEAKER

It is unclear exactly who the speaker of this poem is, or what their relationship is to the dead boy. The speaker seems to have a nearly omniscient understanding of the scene. They are aware that the boy's insurance expired before he died, and that his friends brought flowers, and that his girlfriend paid the preacher "five dollars" to deliver the sermon. But they don't insert themselves into the poem at all—for instance, saying "That boy that they was mournin'" rather than "That boy that *we* was mournin'." This could be because the speaker isn't part of this specific community of people who knew the boy and is only looking on and empathizing with what is happening. Or perhaps the speaker is just an omniscient narrator, observing the poem's world.

While the speaker doesn't necessarily represent Langston Hughes himself, it's worth noting that the poet lived in Harlem at the time this poem was written, and therefore the poem could easily be a response to a real funeral that he witnessed.

SETTING

Nothing is more clear in this poem than the setting: the speaker reiterates that what they are witnessing is a "Night funeral / In Harlem." The poem even specifically mentions "Lenox Avenue," which is a real street in Harlem (now also known as Malcolm X Boulevard).

The specificity of this setting suggests the importance of the poem's geographical and historical context. In other words, the poem's depictions of the dead man's poverty and of the community that covers the costs of his funeral aren't just about

this specific man's relationship to his community, but also about the strong ties between Black people in a racist society. Because of segregation and other racist policies, it was the *norm* for Black communities to be poor and for Black people to die too young. But despite (or because of) their hardships, the poem suggests, these communities look out for their own: the boy is treated with the honor he deserves.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Langston Hughes (1902-1967) was one of the most important writers and poets of the Harlem Renaissance. Along with other leaders of the movement such as Claude McKay, Zora Neale Hurston, and Countee Cullen, Hughes sought to depict the oppressive conditions under which most Black communities at the time lived. He also aimed to depict the beauty and pride of Black culture through stylistic innovations such as "jazz poetry"—that is, poetry inspired by the syncopated rhythms of jazz.

"Night Funeral in Harlem" first appeared in Hughes's 1951 poetry collection, *Montage of a Dream Deferred*. The poems in this collection are "snapshots" of ordinary Black life in Harlem, tracing the events of a single day. The collection was meant to be read as a single poem broken into short flashes—like a movie montage. Hughes wrote in his introduction for the book that he was taking inspiration from "Afro-American popular music," and that he intended for the book-length poem to be:

> marked by conflicting changes, sudden nuances, sharp and impudent interjections, broken rhythms, and passages sometimes in the manner of a jam session, sometimes the popular song, punctuated by the riffs, runs, breaks, and distortions of the music of a community in transition.

In "Night Funeral in Harlem," such influences are apparent in the use of refrain, the call-and-response structure, and the sudden shift between stanza forms in the first and second halves of the poem.

Some Black thinkers criticized Hughes for taking Black poetry back to the oral tradition rather than trying to move it forward. But Hughes (and his enormous audience of working-class and impoverished Black people) didn't see this as a failure. Hughes was merely trying to represent and celebrate Black culture in a society that refused to see Black people as valuable, or even fully human.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Night Funeral in Harlem" was published in 1951, when the Harlem Renaissance had, for all intents and purposes, come to an end. In the 1920s, a great surge of Black creativity pulsed outward from Harlem, a small neighborhood in New York City that overflowed with Black-owned newspapers, publishers, cabarets, and theaters. The arts scene of Harlem beckoned to Black people across not only America, but the world, announcing a new era in which Black artists and intellectuals would celebrate their own identity and heritage regardless of the racist discrimination that they faced.

Unfortunately, the stock market crash of 1929 led to the Great Depression, and soon millions of people were without work—with Black people disproportionately affected by unemployment due to racist hiring and firing practices. By the 1930s, Harlem was only a ghost of its former self: unemployment had ravaged the mostly Black population there, and the city's government ignored the neighborhood's need for structural support. After a 1935 race riot led to three deaths and countless arrests, many of Harlem's former residents, including its artists, dispersed.

In 1951, the U.S. was still feeling the after-effects of World War II and was also on the cusp of the 1954 to 1968 civil rights movement. Housing throughout the country remained largely segregated thanks to deeply racist policies designed to keep Black Americans out of "white" neighborhoods. The year also saw the start of the protests by Black students that would lead to the 1954 landmark decision in *Brown vs. Board of Education*, wherein the Supreme Court declared school segregation unconstitutional.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Poems and Biography — Read a short biography of Hughes from the Poetry Foundation, and find links to more of his poems. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/langston-hughes)
- Hughes's Persona — Read an article by writer and critic Hilton Als about Hughes's careful public persona and the complex, real person behind the poems. (https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/02/23/sojourner)
- The Harlem Renaissance — Read an introduction to the Harlem Renaissance, a groundbreaking cultural movement of which Hughes was an integral part. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/145704/an-introduction-to-the-harlem-renaissance)
- The Poem Set to Music — Listen to a jazz musical performance of Hughes's poem. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RWL-IBmtOGc)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER LANGSTON HUGHES

POEMS

- Cross
- Daybreak in Alabama
- Democracy
- Dreams
- Dream Variations
- Harlem
- 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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