

'Harlem'

Harlem is a literary and cultural movement among black Americans which flourished from early in the 1920's to early in the 1930's. Otherwise known as the New Negro, Harlem refers to the American blacks of African origin. Langston Hughes was one of the more prominent figures among the exponents who included Claude McKay, Jean Toomer and Countee Cullen. The very short poem of 11 lines 'Harlem' is one of Hughes' most famous works. Hughes wrote it in 1951 and it addresses one of his most famous common themes – the limitation of American Dream for African Americans. Hughes was intimately aware of the challenges he faced as a black man in America, and his tone in the poem reflects his complicated experience as one sympathetic, enraged, hopeful, melancholy, or resigned. In the early 50's America was still racially segregated. African Americans were saddled with the legacy of slavery that rendered them into 2nd class citizens in the eye of law.

The title 'Harlem' refers to the New York neighbourhood that became the centre of the Harlem Renaissance otherwise known as 'New Negro' or 'Black Renaissance', a major creative explosion in music, literature and art that occurred during the 1920's and 1930's. Many African American families saw Harlem as a sanctuary from frequent discrimination and destitution in other parts of the country. Unfortunately Harlem's glamour faded at the beginning of the 1930's when the Great Depression set in – leaving many of the prosperous African American families in Harlem destitute once more. The title makes universal what is local. According to Arthur P. Davies, "When [Hughes] depicts the hopes, the aspirations, the frustrations and the deep-seated discontent of the New York ghetto, he is expressing the feelings of Negroes in black ghettos throughout America."

The whole poem "Harlem" is built in the structure of a rhetoric of Interrogations, Metaphors, Alliterations, Simile and climax. The speaker is a black poet – one of those given the dreams of equity and equality. But those never come true. Despite legal, political and social consensus to abolish the apartheid, the blacks could never experience the indiscriminate society they were promised in terms of equality, justice, freedom, and indiscriminate. The promises were all but delayed, deferred and postponed. They ended only in futility and no fulfilment. The poem thus reflects the post II World War mood of the African Americans.

The opening line is a disturbing rhetoric: "What happens to a dream deferred?" leaving the dreamer naturally cut between hope and hopelessness, in doubt and wonder.

The answers are suggested in the form of five other questions in only 10 lines through which the wonder continues till it reaches a climax.

Does it dry up

like raisin in the sun?

Or fester like a sore-

And then run?

Does it stink like rotten meat?

Or crust and sugar over-

like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it sags

like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

The poet wonders if a dream deferred dries up like a raisin in the sun, or if it oozes like a wound with pus running out, or stinks like rotten meat or develops a sugary crust. It may just sag like a heavy load, or it might explode with some violence or outburst. The poem thus concentrates on an examination of the possible evils 'of a dream deferred?'. The unfulfilled dreams remain in the mind like 'a heavy load' only to disturb the balance till it explodes inevitably to destroy all limitations imposed on it. It is only then the society of their dream will be born.

The images are very telling in terms of their universal familiarity. They enable the speaker to express his conviction with some archetypal nature against all oppression, repression or suppression. The first one is its drying "up like a raisin"- a sweet, juicy, fresh and green grape. The next is of festering "like a sore" and then running for accumulated pus suggestive of decay, pain, and infection. The next image is of stinking of "rotten meat" suggestive of a sense of disgust. The penultimate image is one of sagging like a heavy load and the last is of explosion. Thus the images have a cumulative effect on our minds too to be shared by the people anywhere in dismay, despair, dejection and destitution. Though not outright violent, they have all a slightly dark tone. It is a poem by an African diaspora in America in its powerful rendering and communicating the psychology of inferiority complex- the smell, the feel, the taste and the sound of dream discarded.