“Harlem” is a short, reflective poem, somber in tone, with an ominous, pointedly italicized ending. It appeared originally as the first poem in the last sequence of poems (“Lenox Avenue Mural”) in the book Montage of a Dream Deferred. Sometimes Montage of a Dream Deferred has been reprinted in its entirety (as in Hughes’s Selected Poems); sometimes “Lenox Avenue Mural” has been reprinted separately; often “Harlem” has been reprinted alone.

The poem can stand alone. Although it is part of a suite of six poems (“Lenox Avenue Mural”) and of a book of ninety-one poems (reduced to eighty-seven in Selected Poems), it is self-contained and autonomous. It consists of seven short sentences, the last six of which respond to the opening question, “What happens to a dream deferred?” Of the six responses, all but one are themselves framed as rhetorical questions. The whole of Montage of a Dream Deferred is set in Harlem, yet only two of its ninety-one poems mention Harlem in their titles (“Harlem” and “Night Funeral in Harlem”). Simply being titled “Harlem” gives this particular lyric a special recognition in the sequence.

The “dream deferred” is the long-postponed and, therefore, frustrated dream of African Americans: a dream of freedom, equality, dignity, opportunity, and success. This particular poem does not define or give examples of the dream (many other poems in Montage of a Dream Deferred do this); it concentrates, instead, on possible reactions to the deferral of a dream, ranging from the fairly mild-mannered (“Does it dry up/ like a raisin in the sun?”) to the threatening (“Or does it explode?”). The first five potential responses to frustration are essentially passive, the last one active.

Langston Hughes first made his home in Manhattan’s Harlem in 1922. He was a leading figure in the Harlem Renaissance, the 1920’s flowering of African American literature and art. Although he traveled widely and often, he kept circling back to Harlem. He lived there, on a more-or-less permanent basis, from the early 1940’s on, maintaining a home on West 127th Street for the last twenty years of his life. Montage of a Dream Deferred is a product of the late 1940’s, when Hughes had at last settled in Harlem.

The variety of responses that “Harlem” suggests as reactions to the deferring of a dream may be taken as a sort of cross-section of behavior patterns Hughes saw around him among the citizens of Harlem. The poem reflects the post-World War II mood of many African Americans. The Great Depression was over, the war was over, but for African Americans the dream, whatever particular form it took, was still being deferred. As Arthur P. Davis wrote in a 1952 article in Phylon, “with Langston Hughes Harlem is both place and symbol. When he 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.”

Themes and Meanings

Although “Harlem” can stand alone, it is best understood in its original context as a key part of Montage of a Dream Deferred. Hughes conceived Montage of a Dream Deferred as a single, long poem made up of many parts, some as short as three lines (or fewer than ten words), some as long as two pages.

The word “montage” suggests analogies with a visual design consisting of many juxtaposed smaller designs or, better (since a series of poems exists in time more than in space), with a rapid sequence of related short scenes in a film. The most useful analogue of the work is, however, neither pictorial nor cinematic but musical. In a prefatory note to Montage of a Dream Deferred, Hughes wrote that “this poem on contemporary Harlem, like be-bop, is marked by conflicting changes, sudden nuances, sharp and impudent interjections, broken rhythms, and passages sometimes in the manner of the jam session, sometimes the popular song, punctuated by the riffs, runs, breaks, and disc-tortions of the music of a community in transition.”

Hughes had long been interested in and knowledgeable about African American music. Beginning in the 1920’s, he wrote poems about—and sometimes in forms influenced by—the music. His first book, The Weary Blues (1926), took its title from such a poem. Bebop, the innovative jazz of the late 1940’s, with its emphasis on the successive improvisations of individual instrumental voices, most strongly influenced the form and the flavor of Montage of a Dream Deferred.

If the book were conceived as one long bebop tune based on chord changes on the theme of “a dream deferred,” then “Harlem,” strategically placed at the beginning of the end of the book, marks the point at which the theme is restated in preparation for the end. Dreams are mentioned in more than a dozen individual poems in the book; the phrase “dream deferred” appears in a half dozen poems prior to “Harlem” (and in three poems that follow). “Harlem” is the first poem to ask, “What happens to a dream deferred?” (The succeeding poem, “Good Morning,” repeats the question.)

The dream that “Harlem” (and Montage of a Dream Deferred, in general) asks about is the African American version of the American Dream: A “Dream within a dream,” as “Island” (the last poem in Montage of a Dream Deferred) calls it. In the course of the book, individuals imagine the dream in many different ways. Some merely dream of things (a stove, a bottle of gin, a television set, a diamond ring); other dreams also require money, but they are less specifically material (to have a nice place to live, to get an education, to be able to afford a proper funeral). Some intangible dreams require the cooperation of another person or other people (to be fed, to be appreciated, to be respected, to be loved); other intangible dreams can be solitary (to be safe, to be independent, to be happy). Whether one’s dream is as mundane as hitting the numbers or as noble as hoping to see one’s children reared properly, Langston Hughes takes them all seriously; he takes the deferral of each dream to heart.

American Dream

Since America has a capitalist economic system, "the American dream" often refers to acquiring wealth and to the items that wealth can purchase: houses, cars, exotic foods, and servants to relieve one of the mundane and unpleasant chores of life. This list of physical items expresses the goals of a society that sees acquisition as unlimited and a people who feel that they can earn unlimited wealth with hard work. People often immigrate to America from countries with closed social systems where their ability to earn or keep property had been limited, where a lifetime of hard work could never buy one a house in a certain neighborhood, where hard work leaves one as poor as they started: to these people, the American Dream represents freedom. The poem "Harlem" is a response to dreams of freedom from an American who did not see this as a country where dreams could come true, but rather as where people of African descent were denied freedom every hour. Throughout his career, Langston Hughes frequently used the idea of "dreams" to express the idea of social equality, possibly because the power of the word cut across racial lines and because phrasing aspirations as "dreams" made them sound less real and thus less menacing. In 1924, when the South was tightly segregated and hate groups killed blacks regularly, Hughes was surrounded by black intellectuals, and he expressed his dream as one of physical motion: "To fling my arms wide / In the face of the sun, / Dance! Whirl! Whirl! / Till the quick day is done." The 1932 poem "Dreams" is not a personal expression of his own dream but a caution to other African Americans to hold onto their dreams, warning that when dreams die "Life is a broken-winged bird / That cannot fly" and also "Life is a barren field / Frozen with snow." The growing frustration that we can see in comparing these two visions was multiplied many times over by 1951's "Harlem." The right to move freely that looked wistful in 1924 had been put off, or deferred, for so long that Hughes could no longer, as in "Dreams," internalize his frustration as a problem for African Americans. The poem implies that the "opportunity" promised in the American Dream can only fail so often.