



## Harlem (Dream Deferred)

by Langston Hughes

### In a Nutshell

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[Langston Hughes](#) knew how important dreams are. Commonly thought of as the poet laureate of the [Harlem Renaissance](#), Hughes was a prolific artist who wrote essays, short stories, operettas, children's books, and mountains of poems. He celebrated the spirit of the African-American community and wanted to capture the condition and the everyday life of black people through his art in a time when many black artists were afraid to do so, for fear of feeding racial stereotypes. Many of Hughes's poems carry the music, rhythm, and meter found in blues, jazz, and African-American spirituals. He advocated tirelessly for civil rights, and he was a powerful voice in the black community at a time of rampant racism and injustice.

In "Harlem," Hughes asks a very important question about dreams and about what happens when dreams are ignored or postponed. Hughes saw the dreams of many residents of Harlem, New York crumble in the wake of [World War II](#). Some read this poem as a warning, believing that the speaker argues that deferred dreams will lead to social unrest. Notably, [Lorraine Hansberry](#) chose a line from this poem as the title of her famous play, [A Raisin in the Sun](#), which explores the idea of delayed dreams in the world of a black family living in the South Side of [Chicago](#) during the [1950s](#). Both the play and Hughes's poem champion the power of pursuing dreams, and both comment on the state of [civil rights in America](#).

### Why Should I Care?

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As [Otis Redding](#) used to sing, "*I've got dreams, dreams, dreams to remember.*" We've all got dreams, and [Langston Hughes](#) turns on the floodlights and points them directly at the idea of dreams. Sometimes it's easy to rely on wishy-washy words when talking about our dreams, but instead of going all sappy on us, Langston Hughes puts ground underneath the idea of dreams, and compares them to very concrete things in our everyday lives. Sure, we personally might not immediately liken dreams to raisins, festering sores, rotting meat, and heavy loads, but through this poem, our speaker wants us to understand the reality of dreaming and the danger of not acting upon our dreams.

There's a danger to thinking about dreams too abstractly. Our speaker wants us to consider dreams to be as real as flesh and as vital as food. Dreams don't dwell in the cloud palaces. Dreams crawl on the earth, and, if they are not cared for or acted upon, they'll haunt us. Through this poem, we are reminded of the importance of doing (rather than thinking) when it comes to dreams. It's no wonder [Nike](#) used Hughes's poem in one of their [ad campaigns](#) (featuring [Sanya Richards](#) and [Danny Glover](#)). Don't let your dreams sit around gathering dust, *just do it*.