

Harlem

by Langston Hughes, 1951

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a 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 just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

Questions

1. Define deferred, use a dictionary if needed.
2. What five things does he compare a dream deferred to?
3. Why do you believe he used those items in #2 as comparisons?
4. What dream do you think he might be referring to?
5. Why do you believe he titled the poem "Harlem"?
6. What year was the poem written? Why is that significant?
7. Do you feel the poem is optimistic about the future? Why/why not?

Answers

1. It means postponed, delayed, suspended or withheld until a certain time or event (dictionary.com)
2. Raisin, sore, rotten meat, syrupy sweet, and heavy load
3. Answers will vary but might include: several of the items start out as good things but are neglected and turn bad; they are universally recognizable things in order to appeal to all readers; each of the items conjures up a distinct visual, etc
4. Answers will vary but might be: equality for after WWII for African Americans
5. Answers will vary but might include: Harlem was located in the north so that equality should have been more “easily” attained, Harlem was the center of Black expression during the Harlem Renaissance and hence was an important place for African American culture; It was a predominately African American area so that this would have been felt by many residents of the city
6. 1951, the Civil Rights movement was not in full force yet, although the experience of Blacks during the war and fighting against genocide led many to believe that things would change immediately following the end of the war
7. Answers will vary but might include: no it is not because the last line leads the reader to believe that unless something was done, the dreamers were going to explode and all of the US would feel that; yes because Hughes makes it clear that the dream will not be held down anymore in the future as it will “explode” and transform society into something new