



LIFE SKILLS EDUCATION

A Positive Response to a “Deferred Dream”

A Life Skills Analysis of Langston Hughes’ “Harlem”

Subject / Skill(s): English / Personal Responsibility

Grade(s): 8 - 10

Standards Addressed:

- Analyze ideas and information from text and multimedia by formulating questions, proposing interpretations and explanations, and considering alternative views and multiple perspectives.
- Determine the figurative and connotative meanings of words and phrases; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone.
- Analyze the speaker’s use of repetition, rhetorical questions, and delivery style to convey the message and impact the audience.
- Engage in whole and small group reading with purpose and understanding.

Objective: Students will learn about the varied responses people can have to deferred dreams, recognize the power of personal responsibility, and learn how to positively respond to deferred dreams by analyzing the poetic devices used in Langston Hughes’ poem “Harlem.”

Estimated Total Time: 50 minutes

Materials Needed:

- Copies of Langston Hughes’ “Harlem”
- “Harlem” Analysis Sheet
- “Nike - A Dream Deferred” YouTube clip: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QrfLQpN2gZs>
- “Langston Hughes - Mini Bio” bio.com clip: <http://www.biography.com/people/langston-hughes-9346313/videos/langston-hughes-mini-biography-2174109638>
- An audio or video recording of a reading of Hughes’ “Harlem” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=79YjXKYeWCK>

Leader's Guide

Starter (5 minutes):

- Begin class by asking students to think about a time that a personal dream of theirs, a friend, or family member was denied, or pushed away. You can choose to have students write about an example or verbally share a few examples.
- Once students have identified an example, ask students to share how they, their friend, or their family member responded, or reacted, to their deferred dream. [IE: *Did he or she become depressed, angry, more motivated, etc?*]
- Inform students that the poem they will read today, “Harlem,” analyzes the varied responses a person can have when his/her dream is pushed away.

“A Dream Deferred” (30 minutes):

- 1. Students learn the historical context of Hughes’ “Harlem” and discuss the cultural relevance of the poem today.**
 - a. Show students the short “Langston Hughes - Mini Bio” video clip. After viewing the clip, ask students to explain why Hughes is such a well-known American poet.
 - b. Next, lead a brief discussion on some of the issues Hughes faced as an African American during his lifetime. Ask students how he used his poetry to combat civil injustice.
 - c. Finally, ask students if they feel the issues Hughes faced during his lifetime are still present in our society today. Remind students of Dr. Martin Luther King’s “dream,” and ask students if they feel that African Americans in today’s society have achieved King’s dream of equality. Briefly compare / contrast the racial relations of Hughes’ time to the racial relations in America today.
- 2. Students close read “Harlem.”**
 - a. Hand out a copy of Hughes’ “Harlem” to all students. Tell students that you will be reading the poem several times through, each time with a different focus.
 - b. For the first reading, play an audio recording of the poem. Then have students read the poem for an understanding.. After the first reading, ask students to underline the question Hughes is answering in the poem [*What happens to a dream deferred?*]. Be sure students understand the meaning of “deferred.”
 - c. Read the poem again as a class. This time, either the teacher or a student should read the poem aloud, and advise students to identify the two literary devices that are used in the poem [*simile and metaphor*].
 - d. Read the poem for a third time as a class. Direct students to focus on the imagery used in the poem. After reading the poem aloud, ask students to share a few of the words that caught their attention and why.
- 3. Students analyze the effect of the similes, metaphor, and imagery in “Harlem.”**
 - a. Pass out the “Harlem’ Analysis Sheet” to each student. Inform students that they are going to analyze the literary device and imagery used in each line of the poem in order to determine the real meaning of Hughes’ words. Remind students that similes or metaphors are purposefully used by Hughes to describe the type of response a person may have to a deferred dream.
 - b. Complete the analysis of the first line “Does it dry up / like a raisin in the sun?” as a class. Guide students to identify that a simile is being used, the line appeals to sight, and, in this case, the person’s dream simply withers away and dies. If applicable, give an example of a dream you may have had that simply “withered and died” away.
 - c. Have students complete numbers 2 - 5 of the analysis either on their own or in partners. After the analysis is completed, ask students to share their interpretations of the “responses” presented in the five similes. If applicable, ask students to share examples of similar responses they have had to their deferred dream(s).
 - d. Finally, complete number 6 of the analysis together as a class. Ask how the last line of the poem is different from all the others. [*Students should say that it is a metaphor, and the imagery evoked has a destructive/violent feel to it.*] Ask students what an “explosive” response looks like, and if this is a healthy

response to a deferred dream. [Students may respond that an “explosive” response can look like riots, protests, violence, etc. and such responses have negative connotations.]

- e. Show the “Nike - A Dream Deferred” YouTube clip. After watching the clip, discuss with students how Sonya Richard Ross’ dream “exploded” in a positive way during the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Inform students that they will be learning how to turn a deferred dream into a positive change in the next activity.

Power for a Positive Change (15 minutes):

1. Students identify negative and positive responses to deferred dreams.

- a. Remind students that they alone are responsible for how they react to a deferred dream. Throughout history, people have either let their deferred dream ruin their lives or motivate them to be a catalyst for change. Ask students to give a couple of examples of historical or cultural figures or people they know who have let their deferred dreams ruin their lives and those who have let their deferred dreams better their lives.
- b. Point out that a positive response to a deferred dream can be used to effect change, not only in a student’s own life, but in the lives of those in their family, school, and community.

2. Students create a plan to use their “deferred dreams” as a catalyst for a positive change in either their own lives or their community.

- a. Tell students that they are going to create a plan to use a deferred dream of their own as a catalyst to create a positive change in either their life or their community. [IE: If a student did not make a sports team this year, he or she can come up with a plan to use that dream of theirs to inspire them to work towards being a member of the team next year. Or, if students feel that their neighborhoods or school have been overlooked and not well taken care of, they can come up with a plan to inspire people to participate in a neighborhood or school clean-up project, etc.]
- b. Direct students to reflect upon the following questions:
 - i. What is a dream of yours that has been “deferred,” and WHY was it “deferred”?
 - ii. What needs to change in your own life or in your community to make your “deferred dream” a reality?
 - iii. What steps do you need to take to make this **positive change** in your life or in your community?
 - iv. How will this change impact others in a **positive** way?
- c. Once students have finished their reflections, ask for a few volunteers to share.

Conclusion (3 Minutes):

Ask students to identify the different responses to “deferred dreams” that a person can have. Remind students of the key ideas from this lesson:

- All people have “deferred dreams,” but it is up to the person to determine how he or she will let their “deferred dream” affect their life.
- The best response to a “deferred dream” is to “explode” in a positive way by using the “deferred dream” as a catalyst for positive change.

“Harlem”
By Langston Hughes

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?

Langston Hughes, “Harlem” from *Collected Poems*. Copyright © 1994 by The Estate of Langston Hughes. Reprinted with the permission of Harold Ober Associates Incorporated.

Source: *Selected Poems of Langston Hughes* (Random House Inc., 1990)

“Harlem” Analysis Sheet

#	Image	Literary Device Used	Senses Evoked	Interpretation of Response
1	“Does it dry up / Like a raisin in the sun?”	<i>simile</i>	<i>sight</i>	<i>This response is to let the deferred dream simply wither and die.</i>
2	“Or fester like a sore - / And then run?”			
3	“Does it stink like rotten meat?”			
4	“Or crust and sugar over - / Like a syrupy sweet?”			
5	“Maybe it just sags / like a heavy load.”			
6	“Or does it explode?”			