

Etienne Rutkowski “Harlem” Close Reading

In his poem, “Harlem”, Langston Hughes examines stereotypes and discrimination as it relates to racism and black people in the United States. While there is no explicit evidence linking the poem to race and race relations in the United States, Hughes uses verbal irony, shifting tone within anaphora, and anthropomorphic imagery to communicate a message. The similes Hughes employs throughout “Harlem” do not directly reference race in the United States. Instead, the imagery relates to racism by means of hidden verbal irony. The verbal irony comes by indirectly anthropomorphizing images-that seem to resonate with those of the slave trade-to challenge stereotypes around black people in a modern context. The images are innocent ones, representing the emotional effects of deferred dreams. However, with added context of the race riots of Hughes’ time, the images become stereotypes not only the stereotypes of different kinds of slaves. Hughes links these stereotypes to the fundamental challenges of modern daily life; that archetypal reactions are placed black people in their modern context as in slave trade, and the nature of challenging them.

The question of “[w]hat happens to a dream deferred?” (Hughes. L1) could refer more obviously to what the metaphorical imagery of dreams being deferred could literally be. Dreams can seem to “dry up” (Hughes. L2), “fester like a sore” (Hughes. L4), or “crust and sugar over” (Hughes. L7). However, the use of Hughes’ imagery is reminiscent of the slave trade, and the stereotypes around different reactions from black people during times of slavery are described as well.

“[Drying] up like a raisin in the sun” (Hughes. L2+3) could evoke images of working in a field; “[fester] like a sore-And then [running]” (Hughes. L4+5) could be symbolic of discontent and

escape; “[stinking] like rotten meat’ (Hughes. L6) could represent working conditions and racist perceptions of slave and black people in general; “[crusting] and [sugaring] over” (Hughes. L7), as well as “[sagging] like a heavy load” (Hughes. L9+10), seems to represent an unnatural appeasement (turning to the other side) or an exhausted giving up (which would be relevant in the contexts of the slave trade and Hughes’ reality). Through these images Hughes evokes the various emotions of deferred dreams (in the modern context of a black person) and directly compares it with subconsciously uncomfortable imagery relating to the hard circumstances of slavery.

The poem is comprised of four kinds of questions. The first line is a question that looks for an answer; the poem goes on to analyze the question of “[w]hat happens to a dream deferred” (Hughes. L1). The poem continues by repeating four metaphorical questions that are repeat back to back to the point where the questions seem almost rhetorical. This causes the tone to seem to become tired and almost provocative. The anaphora of “does” and “or” strengthen this feeling throughout a seven-line one-paragraph passage.

Next, there is one isolated question, that asks whether “[m]aybe it just sags like a heavy load” (Hughes. L9+10); the “it” is the “dream deferred” or the black slave or modern-day black human being. This question is different because it does not begin with “does” or “or” as with the anaphora of the previous section; furthermore, it does not have a question mark. These changes in structure cause the question to have more the feeling of a statement, and even more rhetorical tone than the previous passage. There is a new tone of defeat, finality, and conclusion.

Finally, Hughes asks the question “[o]r does it explode?” (Hughes. L11). This question reverts back to the form of the previous anaphora, and yet it is italicized; this emphasizes the final question the most of all. Furthermore, the image-based metaphors and rhetorical tone are changed to a short, dynamic, ambiguous question that serves to be cheeky, challenging, a “call-to-action”, and juxtaposition to the rest of the poem. The final line shifts the meaning of what came before it from images representing the emotion of the deferral of dreams towards a provocative challenge of stereotypes (or perceived archetypes). These stereotypes are of slavery and the treatment of black people, and how the “American Dream” (American Dream *deferred*) is a continuation of the same social issues and race relations.

Hughes poem introduces the perception of race relations in the United States and challenges it by swapping out the meaning of the poem that came before the speaker’s last ambiguous question. Hughes uses the anaphora in the speakers’ questions in order to be able to use subtle shifts in nature of the questions the speaker asks to fundamentally change the tone of the poem (because a small change in a repeated pattern is noticeable). “Harlem” communicates its messages around stereotypes and racism through anaphora, tone, and very subtle verbal irony in its imagery.