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“A Dream Deferred”

Life for African Americans pre-Civil Rights movement was bleak. Though they weren’t slaves, and supposedly free and equal, they were certainly still discriminated against. Langston Hughes, a major poet of the Harlem Renaissance, knew first-hand about this experience, as he was a young, poor, black kid during this time. He had a dream about becoming a poet, and despite the harsh circumstances related to him, didn’t let anything get in his way. Blacks were not encouraged to dream or to aspire to become anything, but Hughes, also known as “The Dream Keeper,” wrote a poem, “A Dream Deferred,” to encourage just the opposite. Pulling from personal experience, Langston Hughes wrote poems about dreams and equality that chronicled the lives of African Americans during the 1920s.

“A Dream Deferred” is a series of questions posed by Hughes. He creates questions in relation to what happens when a dream is left unattended. His use of similes in the questions creates vivid images for the reader: “Does it dry up/like a raisin in the sun?/Or fester like a sore--/and then run?” Hughes not only employs similes, but also rhetorical questions. Almost every sentence is a question that cannot be answered. He opens up these hard questions to make the reader try to think of answers for himself. His use of rhetorical questions seems like they could be condescending, yet he instead comes across as inspiring and prompting thought, which is good considering his audience and the time period. The similes and rhetorical questions create images that relate to food dying, or decomposing, or becoming a hindrance to the person. Everyone, regardless of class or race, can picture a raisin shriveling up from the heat or knows the pain of a festering sore. Hughes used simple, yet powerful images to make it everyone’s poem.

During the 1920s and 1930s, many African Americans moved to Harlem in New York City. There was a sudden outpouring of artistic expression from them, known as the Harlem Renaissance. Blues, jazz, musicians, writers, and painters used their skills to express what it was like to be black in America during this time (“Langston Hughes: Poet of the Renaissance”). Regardless of the medium, themes of black identity and black pride were recurring throughout the art that came out of the Harlem Renaissance. These acts layered the basis for the Civil Rights Movement. Langston Hughes was a major part of the Renaissance, and his poem, “A Dream Deferred,” is a great example of Harlem Renaissance art. This particular poem had specific meaning in context to the American Dream of freedom from oppression and liberty (“Explanation of ‘Harlem: A Dream Deferred’”). Hughes, who grew up with his grandmother after his parent’s divorce, turned to poetry as an outlet from the pain of his everyday life (Williams). Even though it was years before Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights movement, this poem had the same ideals and almost the same impact. Hughes describes what happens to a dream deferred to show people besides black people what it feels like to have no place to go. However, the poem exudes hope, just as Hughes always did.

“A Dream Deferred” is a poem with major relevance today and is still taught and quoted by major influencers. The theme of the dream is especially relevant, because people still want to believe in their dreams and not give up. Little children still aspire to be president, an astronaut, a singer, a firefighter, and a super hero. And why can’t they be all those things? This poem encouraged those dreams in the 1920s, and it continues to inspire today. The theme of dreams in this poem also inspired Martin Luther King Jr.’s famous “I Have a Dream” speech. The award-winning play and film *A Raisin in the Sun* got its title, and some of the message, from this poem. The cultural impact of this poem, as well as the historical impact, has spanned generations and been prolific.

Langston Hughes is a celebrated poet, whose poem “A Dream Deferred” sparked the beginning of freedom for African Americans. The similes and imagery, simplistic, yet powerful, enhances the theme of dreams and equality. Clearly a poem that has lasted years, and will continue to inspire and teach, “A Dream Deferred” is a timely poem of excellence.

Works Cited

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