

A Writer's Model

Stylistic Devices in “A Dream Deferred”

What is life worth without dreams and the hope that those dreams can come true someday? What happens when the achievement of a dream is postponed—again and again? In “A Dream Deferred,” Langston Hughes answers these questions by using the stylistic devices of diction, figurative language, and sound to show that keeping people from achieving their dreams can have destructive consequences.

Hughes starts with a question to get his readers thinking about his message: “What happens to a dream deferred?” (line 1). His diction here is important. He uses the word “dream” to mean a hope for or vision of a better future. He chooses the word defer for its two meanings. It can mean both “to put something off until sometime in the future” and “to give in to what someone else wants.” Hughes uses the word in both ways: Someone else postpones the dream, but the dreamer gives in to the delay. The question then is, “How long will the dreamer accept the postponement of his or her dream?”

In the next part of the poem, Hughes answers this basic question about deferred dreams with a series of similes written as questions. The first simile asks if a deferred dream dries up “like a raisin in the sun” (3). The image of the dried and wrinkled raisin contrasts with the fat, juicy grape the dream once was. The images created by the following three similes are worse. Does the deferred dream “fester like a sore— / And then run?” (4–5) or “stink like rotten meat?” (6) or “crust and sugar over— / like a syrupy sweet?” (7–8)? The images in these similes seem to say that if a dream is postponed, it rots or spoils or infects the dreamer. The last simile is not a question but a guess. “Maybe” a deferred dream “just sags / like a heavy load.” (9–10). This simile makes the deferred dream seem like a heavy burden carried on the dreamer’s back, making him or her bow under its weight. All of these similes suggest that a deferred dream becomes something terrible.

In the poem’s last line, Hughes uses another piece of figurative language, a metaphor—“Or does it explode?” (11)—to address his message. He emphasizes the metaphor even more by using different print from the rest of the poem. He seems to be saying that this is exactly what happens: a deferred dream is a bomb that finally explodes. He might also mean that it is not the dream but the dreamer that explodes—in anger.

(continued)

INTRODUCTION

Attention-getting opener

Thesis (with title and author)

BODY

First stylistic device: diction

Ambiguity explained

Second stylistic device: figurative language

Complexities explained

Similes

Metaphor

Ambiguity explained

(continued)

Third stylistic device:

sound

Rhythm

Nuance explained

Rhyme

Nuance explained

CONCLUSION

Restatement of

thesis

Summary of main

points

Relation to broader

themes in life

The sound of the poem intensifies its meaning even more. Like a piece of jazz music, the poem uses rhyme and short bursts of rhythm. The rhymes—“sun/run,” “meat/sweet,” and “load/explode”—pull the ideas behind the similes and the metaphor together, repeating and building up the importance of the ideas like a series of notes repeated in music. Similarly, just as pauses in music provide dynamic rhythms, the lines in the poem have pauses between them, shown by the use of dashes and the skipped lines that set off the central section. The last important question of the poem, asked after a skipped-line pause, is like a final drumbeat that ends a piece of jazz music.

Just what does happen when the achievement of a dream is postponed again and again? Hughes uses the stylistic devices of diction, figurative language, and sound to tell his readers what might happen to a deferred dream. The word “deferred” hints that the dreamer might not always accept the postponement of his or her dream. The five similes seem to say that only the dreamer is hurt. In the final metaphor, however, the deferred dream is a bomb that will eventually explode and hurt many people. Hughes ties the poem together with jazzy rhyme and rhythm. “A Dream Deferred” carries an idea we should all consider—not to let our own dreams become deferred, and not to block others in their quests to follow their own dreams.