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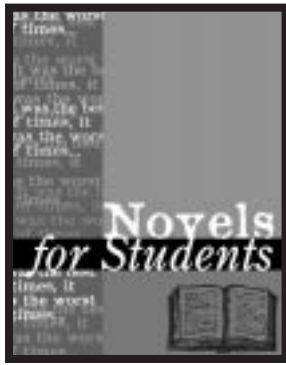
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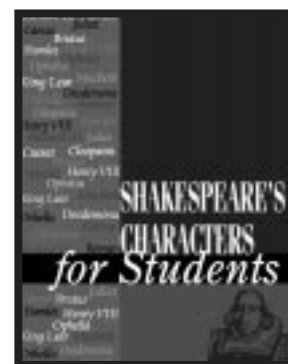
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# The "For Students" line – student friendly and easy to use

*Harlem*

**Lines 9-10:**

Lines 9-10 form the only sentence that is not a question. Hughes implies that although neglecting dreams may yield varied and unforeseeable horrors, one thing is certain: deferred dreams weigh one down physically and emotionally as heavily as a load of bricks.

**Line 11:**

Hughes sets off and italicizes this line to emphasize the larger consequences of mass dissatisfaction. Though this line is a question like those above, here the poet implies that an explosion may occur, hurting or killing those in the vicinity of the explosion as well as the afflicted individual. Hughes is implying that whereas the dream deferred primarily weighs on, infects, bothers, and saddens one of the frustrated dreamer, eventually the epidemic of frustration will hurt everyone.

**Themes**

**American Dream**

Since America has a capitalist economic system, "the American dream" often refers to acquiring wealth and to the items that wealth can purchase: houses, cars, exotic foods, and servants to relieve one of the mundane and unpleasant chores of life. This list of material items expresses the goals of a society that sees acquisition as unlimited and a people who feel that they can earn unlimited wealth with hard work. People often immigrate to America from countries with closed social systems where the ability to earn or keep money was had to be earned in a lifetime of struggle.

**RESEARCH SUGGESTIONS HELP STUDENTS DEVELOP TOPICS FOR PAPERS**

*Topics for Further Study*

*Harlem*



*Street scene of Harlem in 1950, near the time Hughes's poem "Harlem" was written.*

*Harlem*

**Historical Context**

Harlem, of this poem's title, is a famous area of New York City that has had one of the country's largest African-American populations since the First World War. In the 1920s it was the setting of a gathering of artists and intellectuals, later known as the Harlem Renaissance because it resembled Renaissance's surge in artistic production. Figures in the Harlem Renaissance include Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Arna Bontemps, and Alain Locke, and Langston Hughes. Harlem has been a focal point for African culture.

When "Harlem" was first published, it was much different in the United States than it is today. Racism still exists, but laws that can be used to fight against it have been enacted. Most of these laws were enacted from the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s. Blacks became impatient with deferrals and whites, especially in the South, resisted the social forces that were pushing for equality. The Civil War ended in 1865, but the freed blacks did not receive equal status. In the late 1800s, former slaves passed a series of laws known as Jim Crow laws. These laws were designed to keep blacks in a subordinate position. These laws were designed to keep blacks from voting, from attending public schools with whites, and from other activities that would have enabled African Americans to become equal members of society. African citizens opposed these laws, especially in the South where there had been no slavery. The Supreme Court ruled in 1886 that states were not allowed to have laws that discriminated against blacks. In that case, *Plessy vs. Ferguson*, the Court ruled that the legality of laws should be determined by whether they were "separate but equal." This ruling allowed for segregation, but it also meant that the legal system was not required to provide equal facilities for blacks.

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**Criticism**

**Harry Phillips**

*Harry Phillips is a freelance writer and is currently teaching in the Department of English and Foreign Languages at Central Piedmont Community College. In the following essay, Phillips examines how the negative imagery of "Harlem" and the poem's structure of unanswered questions lead the reader to "consider the various psychological and emotional circumstances black individuals might experience in a society that continues to struggle with putting into practice the American dream."*

**THOROUGH BACKGROUND DISCUSSION PROVIDES STUDENTS WITH A DEEPER UNDERSTANDING**

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