Harlem Study Guide

Harlem by Langston Hughes

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Introduction

The brief poem "Harlem" introduces themes that run throughout Langston Hughes s volume *Montage of a Dream Deferred* and throughout his ca reer as a poet. This volume, published in 1951, focuses on the conditions of a people whose dreams have been limited, put off, or lost in post-World War II Harlem. Hughes claimed that ninety percent of his work attempted "to explain and illuminate the Negro condition in America." As a result of this focus, Hughes was dubbed "the poet laureate of Harlem." The poem "Harlem" questions the social consequences of so many deferred dreams, hinting at the resentment and racial strife that eventually erupted with the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s and continues today. Asking "what happens to a dream deferred?" the poem sketches a series of images of decay and waste, representing the dream (or the dreamer's) fate. While many of the potential consequences affect only the individual dreamer, the ending of the poem suggests that, when despair is epidemic, it may "explode" and cause broad social and political damage.

Before Hughes wrote, many African-American artists avoided portraying lower-class black life because they believed such images fed racist stereotypes and attitudes. Hughes believed that realistic portraits of actual people would counter negative caricatures of African Americans more effectively and so wrote about and for the common person. Spoken by a variety of personas, the poems in *Montage of a Dream Deferred* capture the distinct patterns and rhythms of African American folk idiom. Hughes integrated the rhythms and structures of jazz, blues, and bebop into his poetry as well, working to create a poetry which was African-American in its rhythms, techniques, images, allusions, and diction.

Author Biography

Hughes was born in 1902 in Joplin, Missouri, to James Nathaniel and Carrie Mercer Langston Hughes, who separated shortly after their son's birth. Hughes's mother had attended college, while his father, who wanted to become a lawyer, took correspondence courses in law. Denied a chance to take the Oklahoma bar exam, Hughes's father went first to Missouri and then, still unable to be, come a lawyer, left his wife and son to move first to Cuba and then to Mexico. In Mexico, he became a wealthy landowner and lawyer. Because of financial difficulties, Hughes's mother moved frequently in search of steady work, often leaving him with her parents. His grandmother Mary Leary Langston was the first black woman to attend Oberlin College. She inspired the boy to read books and value an education. When his grandmother died in 1910, Hughes lived with family friends and various relatives in Kansas. In 1915 he joined his mother and new stepfather in Lincoln, Illinois, where he attended grammar school. The following year, the family moved to Cleveland, Ohio. There he attended Central High School, excelling in both academics and sports. Hughes also wrote poetry and short fiction *for* the *Belfry Owl,* the high school literary magazine, and edited the school yearbook. In 1920 Hughes left to visit his father in Mexico, staying in that country *for* a year. Returning home in 1921, he attended Columbia University *for* a year before dropping out. For a time he worked as a cabin boy on a merchant ship, visited Africa, and wrote poems *for* a number of American magazines. In 1923 and 1924 Hughes lived in Paris. He returned to the United States in 1925 and resettled with his mother and half-brother in Washington, D.C. He continued writing poetry while working menial jobs. In May and August of 1925 Hughes's verse earned him literary prizes *from* both *Opportunity* and *Crisis* magazines. In December Hughes, then a busboy at a Washington, D.C., hotel, attracted the attention of poet Vachel Lindsay by placing three of his poems on Lindsay's dinner table. Later that evening Lindsay read Hughes's poems to an audience and announced his discovery of a "Negro busboy poet." The next day reporters and photographers eagerly greeted Hughes at work to hear more of his compositions. He published his first collection of poetry, *The Weary Blues,* in 1926. Around this time Hughes became active in the Harlem Renaissance, a flowering of creativity among a group of African-American artists and writers. Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and other writers founded *Fire!,* a literary journal devoted to African-American culture. The venture was unsuccessful, however, and ironically a fire eventually destroyed the editorial offices. In 1932 Hughes traveled with other black writers to the Soviet Union on an ill-fated film project. His infatuation with Soviet Communism and Joseph Stalin led Hughes to write on politics throughout the 1930s. He also became involved in drama, founding several theaters. In 1938 he founded the Suitcase Theater in Harlem, in 1939 the Negro Art Theater in Los Angeles, and in 1941 the Sky loft Players in Chicago. In 1943 Hughes received an honorary Doctor of Letters *from* Lincoln University, and in 1946 he was elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters. He continued to write poetry throughout the rest of his life, and by the 1960s he was known as the "Dean of Negro Writers." Hughes died in New York on May 22, 1967.

Poem Text

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 overlike a syrupy sweet??
Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.
Or does it explode ?

Plot Summary

Line 1:

The speaker of this poem, who may represent Hughes, poses a large, open question that the following sub-questions both answer and extend. This poem, and the volume in which it appears, *Montage of a Dream Deferred,* explore what happens to people and society when millions of individuals' dreams get deferred, or put off indefinitely.

Line 2-3:

The first image in the poem proposes that the dream dries up like a raisin. This simile likens the original dream to a grape, which is round, juicy, green and fresh. Once the dream has lain neglected for too long, it dries up. Though the dream is still sweet and edible, it has shrunken from its former state and turned black. The famous 1959 play *A Raisin in the Sun,* by African-American playwright Lorraine Hansberry, takes its title from this poem. The play also explores the risks and consequences for African Americans of losing sight of dreams and hope.

Lines 4-5:

Where the raisin image invokes the senses of taste and sight, the simile of the sore conveys a sense of touch and bodily impact. Sores reside on one's skin, and are seen, felt, and carried around. By comparing the dream to a sore on the body, the poet suggests that unfulfilled dreams become part of us, like scars. Even if we ignore a sore, it is palpable, visible, and needs attention to heal. Neglected sores may lead to infection, even death. Hughes thus suggests that unattended dreams may not only nag one from outside, they may infect the body and the psyche and slowly kill their host. The word "fester" connotes seething decay and "run" literally refers to pus. Hughes may be punning on the word "run," suggesting that the dream may flee or may run rampant with one's sanity. With the simile of a sore, Hughes raises the stakes of ignoring dreams.

Line 6:

Appealing to all of the reader's senses, the speaker suggests that a dream deferred may also stink. Unlike a sore, a stink cannot be ignored. Smells do not vanish until one gets rid of their source. With the smell of rotten meat, Hughes suggests that dreams deferred will pester one continually, making one sick until they are addressed. Like the raisin image, rotten meat stinks when it is no longer fresh. This image reinforces the idea of decay and waste. Rotten meat is also deadly to eat. Some critics suggest that Hughes uses this image because blacks were often sold rotten meat in ghetto groceries and so were familiar with this stench, as well as the waste and injustice the stench represents.

Lines 7-8:

With these lines, the poet de-escalates the disastrous results of ignoring or blocking one's dreams. A crusted, syrupy sweet will not kill peo ple as meat or sores may, but the image again connotes waste, neglect, and decay. A sweet treat, like a dream, begins as something one yearns for and anticipates eagerly. If it sits unused too long, however, it spoils and leaves a bad taste in the mouth. As Onwuchekwa Jemie notes, the "sweet" may represent American dreams of equality and success that are denied to most African Americans. The American dream itself may have gone bad from disuse and false promises.

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.

Lines 11-12:

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 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 physical 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 their ability to earn or keep property had been limited, where a lifetime of hard work could never buy one a house in a certain neighborhood, where hard work leaves one as poor as they started: to these people, the American Dream represents freedom. The poem "Harlem" is a response to dreams of freedom from an American who did not see this as a country where dreams could come true, but rather as where people of African descent were denied freedom every hour. Throughout his career, Langston Hughes frequently used the idea of "dreams" to express the idea of social equality, possibly because the power of the word cut across racial lines and because phrasing aspirations as "dreams" made them sound less real and thus less menacing. In 1924, when the South was tightly segregated and hate groups killed blacks regularly, Hughes was surrounded by black intellectuals, and he expressed his dream as one of physical motion:

"To fling my arms wide / In the face of the sun, / Dance! Whirl! Whirl! / Till the quick day is done." The 1932 poem "Dreams" is not a personal expression of his own dream but a caution to other African Americans to hold onto their dreams, warning that when dreams die "Life is a broken-winged bird / That cannot fly" and also "Life is a barren field / Frozen with snow." The growing frustration that we can see in comparing these two visions was multiplied many times over by 1951's "Harlem." The right to move freely that looked wistful in 1924 had been put off, or deferred, for so long that Hughes could no longer, as in "Dreams," internalize his frustration as a problem for African Americans. The poem implies that the "opportunity" promised in the American Dream can only fail so often.

Anger and Hatred

"Harlem" carefully measures out the amount of anger it reveals: although it is about the author's circumstances and its title is the place where the author lived, the emotion explained is looked at objectively, as something that is bound to happen in these sort of cases, not just as Hughes's own feelings. Literature by oppressed people has always walked the narrow line between self-expression and a threatening call to rebellion: the same piece could be interpreted in either way, depending upon the circumstances, depending upon how vulnerable the oppressors feel. Treating blacks differently from whites was an idea that always stood on shaky ground throughout the country's history, being directly at odds with the Declaration of Independence's credo that "all men are

created equal," and so the supporters of racial segregation could never rest securely and always had to beware that someday liberty would come to the people they were oppressing. Works of literature-especially those written by African Americans-that openly discussed the frustration felt by African Americans were seen as containing an implied threat. At the time Hughes wrote this poem, blacks had made some gains, most notably in the fields of entertainment and in the integrated army of World War II. Hughes no longer had to suppress or ignore the frustration African Americans were feeling, but, exactly because of those gains, segregationists felt threatened. The prospect of violence is often used to justify laws that are even more oppressive, in the name of maintaining social order. Hughes approached the growing anger of blacks carefully, stopping short of stating directly that it would lead to violence. First, he suggested options to anger, although to the people dealing with frustration, these were not very appealing-rather than turning to anger, frustration could dry up, fester, stink, crust, and sugar over. Second, his tightly controlled objective tone made it clear that this poem is not supporting violence: he could always deny that his intent was to invite people to "explode."

Civil Rights

The "dream deferred" mentioned in the poem could refer to anything, but the title's mention of the Harlem area of New York City, famous for its African-American population, narrows the focus of this poem to racial issues. In the 1950s, the Civil Rights movement made tremendous gains against laws that had forced blacks to endure worse conditions than whites. Most of these gains were made without violence, especially after 1955, when Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. became a national figure by supporting peaceful ways of achieving social change. There had been supporters of civil rights as long as the country had existed, and organizations fighting to end unequal treatment had existed since the first slaves were brought from Africa.

"Harlem" gives us a measure of African-American frustration at this critical time in the country's history, just prior to the Civil Rights movement's most crucial gains. The "explosion" that Hughes mentions actually did happen, but only after the gains made in the 1950s proved to be insufficient, and they happened all over the country in crowded urban areas just like Harlem. If this poem were a prophesy, it was proven false by the peaceful advances made in civil rights during the following decade (although a cynic could see peaceful means as "crusting and sugaring over" or "sagging"). Eventually, though, the road to civil rights did lead to an explosion of violence, just as "Harlem" foretold.

Style

Hughes uses an irregular meter in the lines of "Harlem" That is, he stresses different syllables in each line and varies the length of each line. Together, the varied line lengths and meter create a sense of jagged, nervous energy that reinforces the poem's themes of increasing frustration. In the introduction to *Montage,* Hughes notes that he models his poetry's rhythms on musical forms such as "jazz, ragtime, swing, blues, boogie-woogie, and bebop." Like these musical genres, he explains, "[the volume] is marked by conflicting changes, sudden nuances, sharp and imprudent interjections, broken rhythms and passages... in the manner of a jam session."

Several lines rhyme, but there is not a consistent pattern of rhyme. Rhymes occur in lines 3 and 5 (sun, run), 6 and 8 (meat, sweet), and 10 and 11 (load, explode). Hughes may use these rhymes to emphasize the irregular rhythm of the poem or to draw attention to the connections between different ideas, such as "load" and "explode."

The first and last lines are offset from the poem. In line I, this separation introduces and emphasizes the poem's central question, which is also the volume's central question. The space between this line and the following stanza implies that the answer is unpredictable and perhaps threatening. The second stanza poses four questions in four sentences. By firing one question after another, Hughes builds tension within the poem. The final line is offset and italicized to emphasize the potentially explosive social consequences of widespread dissatisfaction.

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 the European Renaissance's surge in artistic productivity. Key figures in the Harlem Renaissance were Claude McKay, Zora Neale Hurston, Arna Bontemps, Dr. Alain Locke, and Langston Hughes. Since then, Harlem has been a focal point for African- American culture.

In 1951, when "Harlem" was first published, race relations were much different in the United States than they are today. Racism still exists, but there are now laws that can be used to fight against discrimination. Most of these laws were enacted during a period from the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s, when blacks became impatient with deferring their dreams and whites, especially in the Southern states, resisted the social forces that were pushing for equality. The Civil War ended in l865, and with its end, slavery became extinct in the United States, but the freed blacks did not receive full citizenship status. In the late 1 800s, former slave states passed a series of laws known as Jim Crow laws (after a foolish, childlike Negro character in an 1832 minstrel comedy). These laws made it illegal for blacks to vote, ride public transportation, attend schools with whites, and other functions that would have enabled African Americans to become equal members of society. Although many citizens opposed these laws, especially in the North where there had been no slavery, the Supreme Court ruled in 1886 that they were constitutional so long as blacks had facilities similar to those of whites. In that case, *Plessy vs. Ferguson,* the court ruled that the legality of Jim Crow laws rested upon there being "separate but equal" accommodations for both races: in reality, though, blacks were given the worst of everything. To keep blacks from gaining political power, there were other laws that made it difficult to register to vote, requiring land ownership and passage of bogus I.Q. tests that were seldom administered to Caucasians. Many African Americans moved North, where laws did not discriminate, even though people still did. Opportunities for advancement were still scarce in the North, mainly because of the economic/educational circle (undereducated people cannot get well-paying jobs, and people with poor incomes cannot afford higher education). In the South in the first half of this century, blacks were lynched by white supremacist organizations, such as the Ku Klux Klan.

During World War II, from 1941 to 1945, the armed forces became the most integrated organization that the United States had ever had. Although it would still be decades until blacks were admitted to the higher ranks of officers, opportunity was, to a wide extent, equal among enlisted men. This meant that returning veterans came home with a greater sense of how racial equality was possible, raising hopes for integration in whites as well as in blacks. These hopes sometimes twisted into anger when black veterans found civilian society a step backwards from their life in the army: full scale riots broke out in 1946 in Columbia, Tennessee, and Athens, Alabama, as well as lesser racial confrontations in dozens of other cities.

As the call for a new racial openness in the United States grew, though, another social force was also growing: fear of the threat of Communism. World War II had weakened or destroyed most of the powerful European nations and left the Soviet Union as the only other world power with might that could compare to the United States. The two counties had different social philosophies and each was afraid that the other would plant spies in its government or its media to cause its collapse. These techniques were tried by both sides, but not nearly to the degree that citizens feared them. In the South, the public's fear of Communism was used by some whites to oppose integration. In the Presidential election of 1948, for example, Democrat Harry Truman and Republican Thomas Dewey were opposed by southern Senator Strom Thurmond, with the newly formed States Rights Democratic party. Thurmond claimed that regular Democrats supported civil rights due to their "Communist ideology," arguing that Democrats intended to "excite race and class hatred" and "create chaos and confusion which leads to communism." Truman just barely won the election. In 1948, by an Executive Order from the President, a commission was established to study equal treatment in the armed forces. Historians believe that the committee's recommendations would have pushed integration further if the country had not become involved in the Korean Conflict to stop the spread of Communism. As it was, proposals made in 1949 by the Truman administration regarding racial issues like lynchings and voter registration were held up in Congress until the Civil Rights Act of 1957.

Many of the legal inequalities that existed when Hughes wrote this poem were addressed in the 1950s and 1960s, often to avoid the sort of violent conflict that this poem predicts. In 1954 the Supreme Court ruled, in *Brown* vs. *the Board of Education of Topeka,* that it was impossible to make schools "separate but equal," so they would have to integrate: as a result, segregation could no longer be shielded by the *Plessy* vs. *Ferguson* verdict of the 1890s. In 1955, Dr. Martin Luther King gained national fame by leading a yearlong boycott of the bus system of Montgomery, Alabama, which eventually changed the policy of blacks only riding in the back seats of the busses. In 1957 the President had to send U.S. troops to guard black children who had been admitted to a white school because the governor of Arkansas tried to have the children stopped by armed National Guardsmen. In 1961 black and white "Freedom Riders" rode busses across the South to make sure that rest areas on interstate highways were desegregated. Civil Rights Acts passed the legislature in 1957 and 1964, making federal laws out of the nation's growing desire for integration.

Critical Overview

Langston Hughes is considered one of the most influential and prolific African-American poets of the twentieth century. He published poetry from the Harlem Renaissance, a period during the 1920s when African-American artists and their works flourished in Harlem, to the Civil Rights and Black Arts movements. Following the Civil Rights movement, the Black Arts movement of the 1970s combined militant black nationalism with outspoken art and literature. Onwuchekwa Jemie, in his book *Langston Hughes: An Introduction to the Poetry,* interprets the poem as a militant outcry against racial injustice. Jemie argues that the images in the poem build in intensity until "the violent crescendo at the end." Jemie writes, "rotten meat is a lynched black man rotting on the tree. A sweet gone bad is all of the broken promises of Emancipation and Reconstruction, ... integration... and Equal Opportunity. It might even be possible to identify each of the key images with a generation or historical period ..." These interpretations are not shared by many critics, but Jemie's reading is notable for its departure from the widespread black opinion that Hughes's writing was not militant enough to remain relevant in the wake of the Black Arts movement. By finding radical implications in Hughes's earlier poetry, Jemie revives poems such as "Harlem" for politicized contemporary readers.

Commenting on the innovative musical structure of the volume in which "Harlem" is a keynote poem, many critics, including Walter Farrell and Patricia Johnson, writing in the journal *MELUS,* note that Hughes "breaks down the barrier between the beginning of one poem and the end of another. [The volume may be described] as a series of short poems or phrases that contribute to the making of one long poem. Each poem maintains some individual identity as a separate unit while contributing to the composite poetic message. Movement between passages is achieved by thematic or topical congruency or by interior dialogue." "Harlem" is placed toward the end of *Montage* and comments on the widespread despair and frustration expressed by the personas in preceding poems. Thus "Harlem" may be read as both a distinct individual poem and an outstanding note in much larger symphony.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

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 its egalitarian ideals. "

Legendary blues musician W. C. Handy once remarked of one of Langston Hughes's shorter poems that the poet had accomplished in four lines "what it would have taken Shakespeare two acts and three scenes to say." Handy's pithy observation hits at a central feature of much twentieth-century poetry-the poet's ability to create a mountain of meaning from the studied arrangement of a very few words. Published in 1951, "Harlem" manages to evoke nearly a century of African-American history through a series of brief, bluesy, thought-provoking questions that aim to immerse the reader in the imagery of despair and disappointment. The spatial configuration of lines on the page suggests a way into the poem-a way to organize it and make meaning of it. Hughes begins with a central question that we might use to frame the remainder of the poem; and if we feel compelled to make an informed answer to this question at poem's end, then the poem, and reader, will have succeeded in generating thought about what continues to be our most pressing national problem: race relations. Note that the one- and two-line questions in the next section of the poem contain earthy images of disease and spoliation. The conspicuous absence of life-affirming images in this section is the poem's way of pushing us toward a disturbing answer to the opening question. The next section continues the "heavy," hopeless tone, or feeling, of the poem and effectively sets up the shocking conclusion. Because the reader is encouraged to respond to the questions the poem asks, the poem adheres to "call and response" patterning; that is, the tradition in African-American culture in which the "call" of the preacher or civic leader meets with a ready "response" from an attentive congregation or community.

Nearly all critics of "Harlem" interpret the "dream" in the poem's opening section as a symbol of African Americans' desire for equality-social, economic, and educational-in American society. That this desire is "deferred" means that African Americans continue to endure the difficult realities of racism and limited opportunity in a presumably free society. Critic Onwuchekwa Jemie, for example, wrote that the "dream deferred" represents "all of the broken promises of Emancipation and Reconstruction, of the Great Migration, integration and voter registration, of Black Studies and Equal Opportunity." The events the critic cites here begin at the conclusion of the Civil War in 1865 and actually extend beyond the poem's 1951 publication date into the 1970s and 1980s when many Black Studies programs at American universities were eliminated and when reaction against Affirmative Action programs began to escalate. By inviting the reader to answer the poem's first question, Hughes asks one to sit in the role of social commentator and critic of culture and to consider the various psychological and emotional circumstances black individuals might experience in a society that continues to struggle with putting into practice its egalitarian ideals.

The next, longest section of "Harlem" urges us to answer "yes" to the four questions asked. Here, the poet guides us, through his use of images and similes, to a deeper acknowledgment of African Americans' disillusionment with the American dreams of seizing opportunity, working hard, and enjoying success. A well-constructed image creates a mental picture in our imaginations and appeals to one or more of our physical senses. Often, its function is to carry or reinforce an important idea in a poem. In the first question, for example, Hughes uses the image of a dried raisin to convey the idea of shriveling and devaluation. The raisin was once a plump, moisture-laden fruit full with the promise of flavor and enjoyment. However, when the fruit, like the dream of equality, remains unharvested, it metamorphoses into something shrunken and less appealing. Interestingly, this image became the title of an award-winning play, *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry, which dramatizes the deferred dream of a black family's efforts to integrate a white urban neighborhood. Also helping to carry the idea in this question is a simile, or a comparison of unlike things using words such as "like" or "as" (or "than" or "seems"). The simile here compares "it," the deferred dream of equality, with the disfigured grape drying in the harsh rays of a paralyzing sun. In the next question, the image of a sore that will not heal reminds readers that the sting of discrimination and the pain of repeatedly having the dream dashed continues to drain one of the energy needed to keep hope alive. Like the perpetual sore, the stench of inedible, diseased meat speaks to the status of a dream gone bad. The "meal" Hughes serves concludes with candy, a course that potentially might have sweetened a satisfying experience, but instead the candy, like the meat, is spoiled and indigestible. It too has lost its original character and now, it would seem, is served lip as ironic counterpoint to the expectations we hold for after-dinner confectionery and, symbolically, for the bitter taste of thwarted opportunity.

The figurative language and questions of this section prepare the reader for the declarative statement that makes up the poem's next section. Images are piled into "a heavy load," and the weight of keeping one's eyes on the prize of genuine emancipation after repeated defeats causes the dream to sag and puts the prize seemingly out of reach. But before taking up the challenge of the final question, additional investigation into how Hughes creates such a heavy mood may prove helpful in our efforts both to recognize additional structural elements in the poem and to begin providing some cultural context for its construction. Hughes's biographer, Arnold Rampersad, wrote in volume one of *The Life of Langston Hughes,* that blues music deeply influenced the poet throughout his literary career because it "alerted him to a power and pri vacy of language residing in the despised race to which he belonged." Blues elements apparent in "Harlem" include the everyday language of common people and repetition, perhaps the most recognizeable feature of blues compositions. Indeed, one question after another and repetition of the phrase "Does it," the word "like," and "d" and "s" sounds throughout the poem tie it to this blues convention. Hughes's stated intention of writing in order "to explain and illuminate the Negro condition in America" also connects with a thematic dimension of blues songs-the need to articulate the sometimes dreary realities of spoiled hopes and sagging spirits. The need to name and rename the traits associated with perennial disappointment using the language of his people, as Hughes does in his creation of these powerful images, reflects the poet's deep pride in his folk heritage and his commitment to social change.

The poem's final line contrasts mightily with the tone of earlier questions. It is designed both to shock and enlighten readers as to the explosive spirit and drive fueling an American dream and a determined people. A raisin, a festering sore, rotten meat, and spoiled candy now become incendiary devices in the service of this dream that will not die. Yet for those familiar with blues tradition and the persevering spirit of a resisting people, Hughes's explosive conclusion may come as no surprise at all. As novelist and critic Ralph Ellison observed: the blues "at once express both the agony of life and the possibility of conquering it through sheer toughness of spirit." The fact that this final question is underlined suggests that the poet is drawing our attention to "possibility" and "toughness" as qualities born from the need to survive under an oppressive social, political, judicial, and economic order and the decay-ridden conditions it brings. It also underscores, emphatically, that the repressed, but still throbbing, dream of equal treatment will indeed be realized, but in unpredictable and potentially furious forms.

Historically, "Harlem" can be looked upon as a literary harbinger of the Civil Rights and Black Nationalist movements that took place during the two decades after its publication. Additionally, when we compare "Harlem" with earlier, frequently anthologized Hughes poems, such as "Dream Variations" (1924) and "I, Too" (1925), we note a shift from the confident, optimistic tones of the earlier verse to the defiant warning that may be construed from the final line of "Harlem." Literature, as many scholars suggest, is a good way to read history, and if we use these earlier and later Hughes poems as a way of assessing race relations during this quarter century, then we come to the inescapable conclusion that few gains have been achieved during this period. As we know from our study of history, social movements are often characterized by explosive, unpredictable events fueled by long years of disappointment and frustration. Indeed, as this dream continues-in the eyes of many Americans-to be deferred, we might link the final line of "Harlem" with reactions to assassinations, controversial court decisions, and to the institutional kinds of discrimination that persist in our society. And when we recall W. C. Handy's reference to Hughes's wherewithal to be brief, we note in this eleven-line poem the poet's ability to skillfully blend history and art with the politics of resistance.

Source: Harry Phillips, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale, 1997.

Critical Essay #2

This essay discusses the uses of theme and language (Hughes poem "A Dream Deferred," as well as the imagery and connotation or the words he chooses.

Montage of a Dream Deferred (1951) is more carefully orchestrated than Hughes's earlier volumes because conceived as a unity, as one continuous poem, although it is organized in sections and subtitles just like the others, and uses single poems previously published in periodicals. In *Montage* the days of our black lives are telescoped into one day and one night. Montage is primarily a technique of the motion picture, its camera eye sweeping swiftly from scene to scene, juxtaposing disparate scenes in rapid succession or superimposing one scene (layer of film) over another until the last fades into the next. In literature, montage provides a technical shortcut, a means of avoiding the sometimes long-winded "logical" transitions demanded by the conventional story line. Through montage, the reader/viewer is able to traverse vast spaces and times (and consciousness) in a relatively brief moment. Hughes in his prefatory note prepares the reader for this mode of seeing:

In terms of current Afro-American popular music and the sources from which it has progressed-jazz, ragtime, swing, blues, boogie-woogie, and be-bop-this poem on contemporary Harlem, like be-bop, is marked by conflicting changes, sudden nuances, sharp and impudent interjections, broken rhythms, and passages sometimes in the manner of the jam session, sometimes the popular song, punctuated by the riffs, runs, breaks, and distortions of the music of a community in transition.

The theme is the dream deferred. The vehicle is primarily be-bop but also boogie-woogie and other black music. And the mode is montage, which has its musical equivalent in be-bop and its literary equivalent in free association (stream of consciousness). Be-bop, montage, and free association parallel one another so closely in technique (rapid shifts) that the mode could be thought of as all three simultaneously. However, free association is used sparingly, as in the "Dig and Be Dug" section when talk of death leads to talk of war. (Free association will see full service in *Ask Your Mama.)* Some sections open and close with the musical motif (boogie or bop), and each is sprinkled with musical references and phrases, including the "nonsense syllables" or "scat singing" ("Oop-pop-a-da! / Skee! Daddle-de-do! / Be-bop!") which especially characterized bop. In "Dive," for instance, while there is no mention of music, it is the music that is picking up rhythm "faster... / faster," lending its speed to the nightlife on Lenox Avenue. Similarly, "Up-Beat" describes a speeding up of the beat as well as a possible metamorphosis of black youth-their emergence from the gutter, up from the dead into the quick-the kind of process by which the youngsters of "Flatted Fifths," "Jam Session," "BeBop Boys," and "Tag" are transformed from jailbirds into musical celebrities.

The poem could be viewed as a ritual drama, but without the stiffness that the term usually connotes. It is a vibrant seriocomic ceremony in which a community of voices is orchestrated from a multi-set or multi-level stage, the speakers meanwhile engaged in

their normal chores or pleasures. The setting is Harlem, with a close awareness of its connection with downtown Manhattan and its place as a magnetic mecca for refugees from the South. The time: the continuous present on which the burden of times past is heavy, with brief projections into the future. The poem opens in the morning and progresses through daytime into evening, into late night, and on to the following dawn. *Harlem, a microcosm of the black presence in America,* is the victim of an economic blight, relieved only sporadically by the wartime boom. This is hardly the joy-filled night-town of the 1920s. Money, or more precisely the lack of money, determines many of the human relationships presented to our view especially in the opening section. Money is the main riff, the musical current flowing steadily just below the surface and surfacing from time to time, bearing the theme of the dream deferred. A few sit uations transcend the terms and boundaries of the economic imperative, as in "Juke Box Love Song", where love unlocks and lets fly softness and beauty amidst the discordant, dissatisfied voices of poverty, creating a harmony that money could not by itself accomplish; in "Projection," where unity and peace are described in terms of a harmonious orchestration of disparate types; and in "College Formal," where the youthful couples, wrapped in love and melody, lend transcendence to the audience as a whole.

The deferred dream is examined through a variety of human agencies, of interlocking and recurring voices and motifs fragmented and scattered throughout the six sections of the poem. Much as in bebop, the pattern is one of constant reversals and contrasts. Frequently the poems are placed in thematic clusters, with poems within the cluster arranged in contrasting pairs. *Montage* does not move in a straight line; its component poems move off in invisible directions, reappear and touch, creating a complex tapestry or mosaic.

The dream theme itself is carried in the musical motifs. It is especially characterized by the rumble ("The boogie-woogie ramble / Of a dream deferred")-that rapid thumping and tumbling of notes which so powerfully drives to the bottom of the emotions, stirring feelings too deep to be touched by the normal successions of notes and common rhythms. The rumble is an atomic explosion of musical energy, an articulate confusion, a moment of epiphany, a flash of blinding light in which all things are suddenly made clear. The theme is sounded at strategic times, culminating in the final section....

The poet has taken us on a guided tour of microcosmic Harlem, day and night, past and present. And as a new day dawns and the poem moves into a summing up in the final section, he again poses the question and examines the possibilities:

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?

The images are sensory, domestic, earthy, like blues images. The stress is on deterioration-drying, rotting, festering, souring-on loss of essential natural quality. The raisin has fallen from a fresh, juicy grape to a dehydrated but still edible raisin to a sun-baked and inedible dead bone of itself. The Afro-American is not unlike the raisin, for he is in a sense a desiccated trunk of his original African self, used and abandoned in the American wilderness with the stipulation that he rot and disappear. Like the raisin lying neglected in the scorching sun, the black man is treated as a thing of no consequence. But the raisin refuses the fate assigned to it, metamorphoses instead into a malignant living sore that will not heal or disappear. Like the raisin, a sore is but a little thing, inconsequential on the surface but in fact symptomatic of a serious disorder. Its stink is like the stink of the rotten meat sold to black folks in so many ghetto groceries; meat no longer suitable for human use, deathly. And while a syrupy sweet is not central to the diet as meat might be, still it is a rounding-off final pleasure (dessert) at the end of a meal, or a delicious surprise that a child looks forward to at Halloween or Christmas. But that final pleasure turns out to be a pain. Aged, spoiled candy leaves a sickly taste in the mouth; sweetness gone bad turns a treat into a trick.

The elements of the deferred dream are, like the raisin, sore, meat, and candy, little things of no great consequence in themselves. But their unrelieved accretion packs together considerable pressure. Their combined weight becomes too great to carry about indefinitely: not only does the weight increase from continued accumulation, but the longer it is carried the heavier it feels. The load sags from its own weight, and the carrier sags with it; and if he should drop it, it just might explode from all its strange, tortured, and compressed energies.

In short, a dream deferred can be a terrifying thing. Its greatest threat is its unpredictability, and for this reason the question format is especially fitting. Questions demand the reader's participation, comer and sweep him headlong to the final, inescapable conclusion.

Each object (raisin, sore, meat, candy, load) is seen from the outside and therefore not fully apprehended. Each conceals a mystery; each generates its own threat. The question starts with the relatively innocuous raisin and, aided by the relentless repetition of "Does it... ?" intensifies until the violent crescendo at the end. With the explosion comes the ultimate epiphany: that the deadly poison of the deferred dream, which had seemed so neatly localized (the raisin drying up in a comer harmless and unnoticed; the sore that hurt only the man that had it; the rotten meat and sour candy that poisoned only those that ate it), does in fact seep into the mainstream from which the larger society drinks. The load, so characterless except for its weight, conceals sticks of dynamite whose shattering power none can escape.

Rotten meat is a lynched black man rotting on the tree. A sweet gone bad is all of the broken promises of Emancipation and Reconstruction, of the Great Migration, integration and voter registration, of Black Studies and Equal Opportunity. It might even

be possible to identify each of the key images with a generation or historical period, but this is not necessary: the deferred dream appears in these and similar guises in every generation and in the experience of individuals as well as of the group. The poem is the "Lenox A venue Mural" of the closing section title, painted in bold letters up high and billboard-size for all to see. To step into or drive through Harlem is at once to be confronted with its message or question. The closing line is Hughes's final answer/threat and will return with some frequency in *The Panther and the Lash.*

Each of the five other poems of the final section takes the question and plays with it, incorporating variations of it from earlier sections. All sorts of things are liable to happen "when a dream gets kicked around." And, sure, they kick dreams around downtown, too, even on Wall Street, not to speak of Appalachia or the Indian Reservations. But right now, one thing at a time, first things first: "I'm talking about / Harlem to you!"

Source: Jemie, Onwuchekwa, *Langston Hughes: An Intro duction to the Poetry,* Columbia University Press, 1976 pp. 63-5, 78-80.

Adaptations

An audio cassette titled *Langston Hughes Reads* is available from Audiobooks.

Topics for Further Study

In this poem, Hughes asks what happens to a dream is put on hold, giving a series of possibilities. Write a poem in which you tell readers what does happen to such a dream. Use concrete imagery, as Hughes does, to speak of the dream as a real, tangible object.

Do research on one of the race riots of the mid1960s, such as the one in Watts (Los Angeles), Chicago and Atlanta. What was the immediate cause? What social conditions led up to the violence? Write a report that explains the situation to your class.

Why is this poem named "Harlem"? What other locations would have had a similar meaning? Name the social events that have occurred since the poem's publication in 1951 that you feel help prove that Hughes's fears were realistic.

Compare and Contrast

1951: The United States was involved in the Korean Conflict to help keep communist North Korea out of South Korea. Fighting ended in a truce in 1953 that established a De-Militarized Zone, but tensions between the two counties continue to this day.

1964-1973: U.S. troops were active in combat in South Vietnam, in an attempt to keep Communist-backed North Vietnam from overtaking the country. In 1973 the U.S. withdrew military support, and South Vietnam was conquered in 1975.

1990: Straining under the weight of an unproductive economy, the Soviet Union, the world's largest Communist country, dissolved.

Today: Communism is not considered a threat to America, with the most stable Communist countries existing being tiny Cuba and isolationist China.

1951: The first nuclear fusion reactor for providing power was built by the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission.

1979: An accident at the Three Mile Island nuclear plant near Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, raised public fear about the safety of nuclear energy.

1986: A radiation leak at a nuclear plant in Chernobyl in the Soviet Union killed an unspecified number of workers (the number is unknown because of the government's secrecy) and made nearby land and houses uninhabitable for years.

Today: Despite the fact that no new nuclear plants have been built since 1978, America gets one fifth of its electrical energy from nuclear power.

What Do I Read Next?

Hughes published several volumes of autobiography in his lifetime: *The Big Sea,* published in 1963, covers the period in which this poem was written and the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s.

Hughes was also the author, along with Milton Meltzer and C. Eric Lincoln, of a 1956 book titled *A Pictorial History of the Negro in America* that was reprinted in 1983 as *A Pictorial History of Black Americans.* The photos in this book give a vivid sense of the times. For instance, the reader can see separate "Colored" facilities at places such as restaurants, movie balconies, and parking lots. Hughes's text reads like a moderate intellectual whose patience is wearing thin.

The title of Lorraine Hansberry's 1959 award winning play *A Raisin in the Sun* is of course taken from this poem. The play, which was the first by a black woman to appear on Broadway, dramatizes almost every concern of African Americans in the 1950s.

Aldron Morris's 1984 study *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for a Change* is one of the most comprehensive and thoroughly documented works about the grassroots organizations that brought black citizens together to defeat institutionalized segregation.

The Shaping of Black America by Lerone Bennett, Jr., first published in 1975 and revised in 1991, has proven to be of lasting value as a quick yet insightful overview.

Further Study

Berry, Faith, *Langston Hughes: Before and Beyond Harlem,* Westport, CT: Lawrence Hill & Co., 1983.

A meticulously researched biography by a founding member of the Langston Hughes Society, this book is full of fascinating anecdotes.

Cashman, Sean Dennis, *African-Americans and the Quest for Civil Rights 1900-1990,* New York: New York University Press, 1991.

A very thorough and readable account of the growth of the Civil Rights movement.

Meier, August, and Elliot Rudwick, *From Plantation to Ghetto,* third edition, New York: Hill and Wang, 1976.

This book gives too little attention to the period of the late 1 940s and early 1 950s, but it has a large, informative section about Hughes's part in the Harlem Renaissance.

Truman, Harry S., "Civil Rights Message," in *The Negro in American History,* Mortimer 1. Adler, gen. ed., Charles Van Doran, ed. Encyclopedia Britannica Corp., 1969.

This is the text of Truman's address to Congress on February 2, 1948, outlining the actions that the President thought should be taken in response to a report issued by the President's Committee on Civil Rights. A good indicator of the times, Truman's speech calls for the government to uphold rights that we take for granted, such as "protecting more adequately the right to vote" and "providing federal protection against lynching."

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David Galens

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Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

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Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Poetry for Students (PfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, PfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of PfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of PfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in PfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by PfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an at-a-glance comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

PfS includes The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature, a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Poetry for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Poetry for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Poetry for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from PfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from PfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Poetry for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Poetry for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

Editor, Poetry for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535