

## DE/RECONSTRUCTING REALITY: THE DREAM MOTIF IN THE POETRY OF LANGSTON HUGHES

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### Abstract

This research paper underpins the significant role played by dreams in the construction of reality in the poetry of the American poet Langston Hughes. Being a member of the Black community, Hughes recorded the nuances of Black life and the frustrations they faced, struggling to find a place in a world that would rather deny their very existence. He dreamed of a world that would treat all humans equally and would give voices to all minorities and ethnic groups. Dreams were a means of reconstructing as well as deconstructing reality for Hughes, and a 'positive' means of escapism from the brutal world without. In his dreams, the poet was able to live his desired-for life and enjoy the harmony within until time would come when his dreams will be part of a reality lived by all human kind. The function of the dream, herewith, is to deconstruct the ruthless reality where the poet lives and reconstruct a parallel reality where every noble thought becomes plausible. The dream becomes not only that of one black American, but a collective dream for all the Blacks and by extension, the whole human race.

**Keywords:** Dreams, Reality, Deconstruction, Black, Hughes

### INTRODUCTION

Dreams are always used as 'mechanisms' for defying and challenging the external reality especially when one stands helpless and hapless towards controlling this reality. Being unable to stand for one's rights or even witness the slightest change in one's status-quo perturbs one's thoughts and makes one on the abyss of dysphoria. In dreams, everything is different. Dealing with one's hopes and wishes and concretizing them in a plethora of forms is a means of creating an inner realm wherein everything is controlled by the human mind. This idea could be taken a step further if we talk about the frustrations of a whole community of people who find in the external world a place of pain and woe. The dream, at that time, becomes collective and the parallel world created within becomes shared.

Langston Hughes (1902 – 1967) was an American poet, novelist and playwright, best known as the leader of the Harlem Renaissance. Born in cold and darkness, Langston Hughes "would find much of his childhood equally bereft of light and warmth" (Leach 1). His parents were separated soon after his birth and he didn't enjoy a warm-hearted family gathering in his life. Raised mainly by his maternal grandmother, Hughes was exposed to stories about his ancestors that made him in dire need of defending his black colour, not through violence, but through genuine art. His first two books, *The Weary Blues* (1926) and *Fine Clothes to the Jew*

(1927), established his literary career as a major force in the Harlem Renaissance. Hughes' art was firmly rooted in the belief that art has the ability to heal and to teach the whole humanity the meaning of profound love. In his work, Hughes is quoted as saying: "My seeking has been to explain and illuminate the Negro condition in America and obliquely that of all human kind" (qtd in Howard).

## THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE

Spanning in the 1920s and 1930s, the Harlem Renaissance was a literary, artistic, and intellectual movement that ignited a new black identity. Instigated by Alain Locke (1885-1954) in 1926, it was known as 'The Negro Renaissance'; Negro "a word of pride, of strong vowels and a capital N" (Hutchinson 1). "Negro life is seizing its first changes for group expression and self-determination (qtd. in Gates 114); those were the words of Locke who explicated a sundry of times that this movement will promote a 'new negro' who will be intelligent, resolved; who will be "trying to hold himself at par, neither inflated by sentimental allowances nor depreciated by current social accounts. For this he must know himself and be known for precisely what he is" (Locke qtd. in Gates 115). Harlem, hence, became the center of a spiritual enlightenment in which Locke's 'new negro' transformed social disenchantment into race and racial pride.

## DREAMS: A REVIEW

Denotatively, according to *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, a dream is a "vision, series of pictures or events, presented to a sleeping person ("dream"). It is, also, "an idea of vision that is created in your imagination and that is not real" or "a state of mind marked by abstraction or release from reality" ("dream"). *Oxford English Dictionary* adds that a dream is an "unrealistic self-deluding fantasy". All previous definitions underscore that dreams are not real events and hence, they uproot the dreamer from reality. In contrast, the word reality is defined as "the true situation that exists; something that actually exists or happens: a real event, occurrence, situation" ("reality"). Thus, dreams and reality are both two ends of the spectrum; reality is always divorced from dreams, and vice versa. If dreams epitomize one's cherished aspirations and ambitions, this would definitely mean that the real world is in total contrast to the dream.

In his *Dictionary of Literary Symbols*, Michael Ferber maintains that dreams are "the occasions for interpolated tales within larger narratives; the tales maybe told in a different mode; usually more symbolic or allegorical; and they may bear oblique and subtle connections to their frameworks" (63). Ferber expounds the symbolic meanings of dreams for he believes that sometimes they tend to be obscure, ambiguous, and incomprehensible. By contextualizing these dreams, they become meaningful and the symbols inherent within are decrypted. According to Ferber, dreams are always subjective and individualistic and that is why the formulaic phrase for introducing a dream in English literature was 'Me thinks' or 'Me thought', which does not quite mean 'I think' or 'I thought' but rather 'It seems/seemed to me', hence 'I see/saw' as in a dream of vision (63).

Ancient conventions about dreams were that dreams are nothing but messages sent by gods. To the Egyptians, for example, dreams were "relatively straightforward and were simply a perception of things that existed but could not be seen or heard in waking life" (Mackenzie). They tried to make contact with their dreaming world by performing rituals and summoning invisible spirits. Egyptians believed that their gods showed themselves in dreams, and hence, they had to exert the utmost effort to decipher the messages of their gods. The Greeks, in addition, followed the same route of the Egyptians. They held the same beliefs but also believed that in dreams, they could discover cures to their illnesses and solve problems faced in their daily lives. However, the philosopher Aristotle held different thoughts and ideas about the dream. For him, dreams were observations, not sent by God, because even animals dream. Dreams, for him, are but the products of experiences and situations while awake used by one's imagination when he is asleep.

In the seventeenth century, philosopher Rene Descartes (1596-1650) maintained that dreams could lead the dreamer astray as they pose a threat to the dreamer's knowledge of the real world. In his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes illustrated the problem by using the dream example "to motivate skepticism about sensory-based beliefs about the external world, including his own bodily existence" ("Dreams and Dreaming"). According to him, dreams "suggest that even in a best-case scenario of sensory perception, in which standard cases of misperception ... can be ruled out and which consequently seem indubitably certain" (Descartes 6). Thus, sensory deception is possible. Dreams are the gateways to deception and misperception because the dreamer would reach a point where he will no longer be able to distinguish between what's real and what's imagined. "Although, in truth, I should be dreaming" Descartes confides in his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, "the rule still holds that all which is clearly presented to my intellect is indisputably true" (15).

In the eighteenth century, Voltaire (1694-1778) argued that dreams result from the excess of the passions of the soul. In his letter to the editor of the *Literary Gazette* in August 1764, he maintained that “every dream of a forcible nature is produced by some excess, either in the passions of the soul, or the nourishment of the body; it seems as if nature intended to punish us for them, by suggesting ideas, and making us think in spite of ourselves” (Voltaire 137). He, thus, believes that dreams are the outcome of over-thinking: “What happens in the light, continues its existence in the darkness” (Voltaire 137). Kant (1724-1804), besides, in his book *The Dreams of the Spirit*, states that dreams can be more vivid than waking thoughts because the senses are closed down. Dreams are, thereupon, incarnations of waking life and representatives of the struggles that take place in the external world.

As for the Romantics, they “often explored the creative process through dreams, and an analogy between the creative imagination and the power of dreaming” (Murray 293) was made explicit by poets such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John Keats, and Thomas De Quincey. Coleridge and Wordsworth were interested in how dreams could enable them to escape from the tyranny of the senses, or “in the tradition of the European Romantic poets, might be a means of transcending the limitations of the senses” (Murray 293). Dreams offered a means of escapism from senseless realism and “an introduction to the mysteries of the folk tale and old romance” (Murray 293). In the Romantic era, dreams could be seen as a theatre of the mind, and were at times said to be more emotionally touching than poetry itself. They were seen as creations of the mind, the dramas of a powerful imagination, independent of self will.

From a psycho-analytic viewpoint, Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) or as he is called ‘The Father of Psychoanalysis’, believes that dreams, in all their moulds, are forms of wish-fulfillment. They are considered attempts by the unconscious to resolve conflicts of some sort. That is why dreams tend to be abundant with hallucinatory images and unexplained phenomena. In his book *Freud’s Theory of Dreams: A Philosophic-Scientific Perspective*, Michael T. Michael relates this to the idea that the “consciousness in dreams is not the same as the consciousness of thoughts in waking life” (40). Additionally, Freud considered dreams “to be the royal road to the unconscious as it is in dreams that the ego’s defenses are lowered so that some of the repressed material [in the id] comes through to awareness albeit in distorted form” (McLeod). Dreams perform crucial tasks for the unconscious mind and serve as valuable clues in how it operates. Freud assumes that the reason why some people don’t remember their dreams is because the super ego is at work protecting the conscious mind from the disturbing images and desires conjured by the unconscious.

Carl G. Jung (1875-1961) was Freud’s best friend but they had a bitter fight together, partly because of their different theories of the nature and functions of dreams. In Jung’s view, “dreams are the direct, natural expression of the current condition of the dreamer’s mental world” (Bulkley). Jung rejected Freud’s claim that dreams disguise their meanings; rather he believed that the nature of dreams is to present “a spontaneous self-portrayal, in symbolic form, of the actual situation of the unconscious” (Jung 505). Additionally, dreams “sometimes portray the dreamer’s relation with the external world, that is, with the people, events, and activities of the dreamer’s daily life” (Bulkley). At other times, dreams depict the dreamer’s inner world; “the dream figures are personifications of the thoughts, and feelings within the dreamer’s own psyche” (Bulkley).

Thus, throughout the ages, the issue of dreams and dreaming has been debatable. Despite the sundry perspectives, all philosophers and psycho-analysts agree that dreams are gateways from the external world to the psyche and are always ways through which a person could be understood and his feelings interpreted. The ‘dream’ motif has been used extensively by the American poet Langston Hughes in its various forms and meanings to express his deepest desires and outliving aspirations and emotions. The dream motif in this paper refers to the pattern through which the dream tells the reader something about the dreamer’s reality (both outer and inner) by either re-constructing or de-constructing it.

## THE DREAM MOTIF

By definition, a motif is “one of the dominant ideas in a work of literature; a part of the main theme. It may consist of a character, a recurrent image or a relevant pattern” (Cuddon 520). In his poetry, Langston Hughes depends on the ‘dream’ motif to expound his thoughts and feelings. The poet’s dreams are those that pertain to all people as ‘individuals’, ‘communities’ or even ‘whole races’. Hughes dreams of a home (security), of brotherhood, and of the realization of racial equality. It could be argued that Hughes’ dream motif is divided into five phases: reconstructing the internal reality, (the im/possibility of) transferring the internal to the external realm, deconstructing the internal reality, building a parallel collective inner reality, de/reconstructing the internal and the external realities.

## Reconstructing the Internal Reality

In his poem 'I Dream a World', Hughes uses the pronoun 'I' to signify that his dream is personal, a dream in the Freudian sense. The anaphoric sentence 'I dream a world' ties the poet's dream to the whole cosmos since his dreams won't be realized unless the whole world reacts and responds. He dreams a world "where no man / No other man will scorn, / Where love will bless the earth / And peace its paths adorn" (1-4). He dreams of love and peace, two concepts that if transferred from the internal world of dreams to the external reality, life would be a safe haven for all people. Additionally, he dreams of freedom and of equality: "A world I dream where black or white, / Whatever race you be, / Will share the bounties of the earth" (9-12). Apparently, the world the poet dreams is a utopia that could never exist on earth. The use of personification in 'wretchedness will hang its head' as if 'wretchedness' is a criminal that will be hanged and the simile in 'joy, like a pearl' tend to make the contrast between wretchedness and joy stark and hence, highlight the huge difference between his dream and the external reality where he lives. Also, the use of the iambic tetrameter enhances the beauty of the dream and accentuates the intensity of the outer realm. The final line of the poem "Of such I dream, my world!" (16), concludes the poem and hence, the dream.

In 'Dream Variations', Hughes dreams to 'fling his arms wide' (1), to 'whirl' and to 'dance' in some place of the sun (3). After he dances, he wants to rest beneath a tall tree "while night comes on gently, / Dark like me" (7-8). In the second stanza, he explores the same aspirations of flinging his arms wide and dancing, but this time "in the face of the sun" (11) and then rest under that same tall tree until night comes "tenderly / Black like me" (16-17). In this poem, the self is realized through the integration with nature, parts of nature that share the dreamer's skin colour and this is mirrored through the use of the internal rhyme (me – tenderly – tree). The contrast between the first scene where the speaker dances and whirls – in the sun – and the second scene where he rests – at the evening – underscores the contrast between white and black. He chooses to rest only when he succeeds in the process of self-recognition; he does not feel ashamed of his origins or his dark or black complexion any more. The final line of the first stanza is used as a kind of reminder for the readers that this is nothing but a dream: "That is my dream" (9). This line also seems to stand out of the poem as it is the line that divides the two stanzas that this poem is composed of. The first stanza is made up of 9 lines (line 9 being the line wherein he stresses the fact that he is in a dream state) and the second stanza is made of 8 lines. By taking line 9 off, readers will not be able to distinguish between reality and dreams, and hence this line plays the role of the bell that rings to wake a person up from his dreams.

## The Im/possibility of Transferring the Internal to the External

The first step towards making one's dreams come true is thinking about how these dreams could be realized and metamorphosed from being far-away 'dreams' to becoming part and parcel of reality. However, what happened to the poetic persona here is something totally different. In 'I continue to Dream', the speaker turns his dreams into a 'bronze vase' and a 'round fountain with a beautiful statue in its centre'. The dreams, instead of having an ephemeral quality, turn into fixedness and become inertia. They become vases and fountains; beautiful from the outside, yet are lifeless objects that exist only for the sake of visual fulfilment. Dreams forsake their initial moulds because, according to Hughes, they become meaningless and utterly incomprehensible, for himself as well as for the other people alike. For the first time, he introduces another character, it is not clear who that character is but this imaginary converser alludes to the poet's attempt to take his 'inner' and 'personal' dreams to another entity outside the self. He asks: "Do you understand my dreams?" (4), the character does not respond, Hughes does instead: "Sometimes you say you do, / And sometimes you say you don't" (5-6). Why does Hughes answer his question quickly and does not give a chance for the other person to reply? One could interpret this in two ways: either the speaker is totally aware of that character's reply beforehand, so instead of letting him/her think of an answer, he replies for him/her, or he could be addressing no one but himself. In all cases, this poem testifies to the complexity and portentousness of dreams and that not everyone would be able to highlight their meanings. He concludes the poem by saying: "Either way it doesn't matter. / I continue to dream" (7-8). The speaker is not interested whether his dreams are lucid or coherent, all he cares about is that he is going to continue dreaming. If dreams become part of the real world, they are not going to change the status quo (they turned into a fountain and a vase), but perhaps if they remain in the inner world, things might change. In 'The Dream Keeper', the poet incites all people to keep their dreams inside their hearts, 'away from the too-rough fingers / Of the world' (7-8). He will keep these dreams because if they get known, they will probably get destroyed.

## Deconstructing the Internal Reality

At this stage, the poet falls into dark despair. Despite having very simple dreams (of brotherhood, home,

equality), he decides to make them come true only in his inner microcosm due to the impossibility of their recognition in the macrocosm. Although this seems a travesty, the poet was satisfied: at least he is enjoying himself even if it is only in his sleep. In his poem 'Oppression', Hughes explicates that even dreaming became prohibited. The black community is denied the pleasure of dreaming being regarded as the subaltern in this real world. By controlling dreams, the world seems to be treating the blacks as mere objects, who are not allowed to have feelings and emotions: "Now dreams/ Are not available / To the dreams" (1-3). For the first time, the poet uses the metaphor of the 'night' in a negative approach suggesting that morning will never come: 'In some lands / Dark night / And cold steel / Prevail" (6-9). The use of the long vowel sound in 'dark', 'cold', 'steel', and 'prevail' reflects the sense of monotony and longevity and adds to the idea of waiting a very morose facet. In his dreams, he used to identify himself with the 'night' and with 'darkness', but in this poem, he is deterred from any kind of self-recognition or self-identification even if negatively. A glimpse of hope is embedded in the final lines of the poem when the speaker demystifies that 'the dream / Will come back, / And the song/ Break/Its jail' (10-14). He personifies the dream, giving him the quality of being a person who will eventually become free and get out of his state of captivity.

### **Building a Parallel Collective Inner Reality**

In his poem 'Dream Dust', Hughes stresses that a person is defined through his/her dreams:

Gather out of star-dust  
Earth-dust,  
Cloud-dust,  
Storm-dust,  
And splinters of hail,  
One handful of dream-dust  
Not for sale. (1-7)

In this poem, through the use of repetition in the word 'dust', the speaker maintains that everything in life may turn into dust: one's aspirations, reality, and even perilous struggles. The only thing that the speaker stresses is not for sale is the 'handful of dream-dust'; suggesting that if everything in life could be sold, dreams should not be, for they define one's true reality. The poet, here, has no problem when his outer reality becomes of no value or even of no proper existence for his dreams are more crucial in the construction of his 'true' self. However, adding that same word 'dust' to the word 'dream' implicates that dreams, like 'earth', 'cloud' or 'storm' may disappear and that's why he says 'handful of dream-dust'. By concretizing the 'dream', the speaker compares this abstract notion to an object one could carry in his hand. The image implies that if one does not control his dreams and have a tight grasp of them, they will fly away and never be of reach again. In this case, a person would be lost both externally and internally, searching – in vain – for his true being. The fact that lines 2, 3, and 4 are composed of only 2 syllables, highlight the fact that life passes in a glimpse of an eye.

In his poem 'Dreams', additionally, Hughes stresses the same idea, i.e., that people should hold on to their dreams and never let them go:

Hold fast to dreams  
For if dreams die,  
Life is a broken-winged bird  
That cannot fly.  
Hold fast to dreams  
For when dreams go  
Life is a barren field  
Frozen with snow.

The anaphoric sentence: 'Hold fast to dreams' emphasizes the importance of dreams in one's life and underlines that dreams move fast and if one does not hold to them firmly and quickly, they will vanish. The imperative form here also implies urgency and resolution. In this poem, the abstract idea of the 'dream' is personified: in line 2, dreams are given the human characteristic of death and in line 6, they are compared to a person who leaves another due to lack of care or interest from the other person. In both cases, a dream is seen to be a friend who always needs extra attention and affection. As for life, it is compared to both a 'broken-winged bird' and a 'barren field' without the existence of dreams. Hence, the conceit is extended if we maintain that life and dreams are two friends who depend on each other and who value one another but the one who controls the relationship is definitely the dream, for if anything harms him, the other entity will be devoid of any happiness or strength. This poem is made of an 8-line stanza. All the lines, except lines 3 and

7, are written in iambic trimeter. Lines 3 and 7 are exceptional because in these lines, the speaker explains the consequences that will bequeath life if dreams die or go and thus, demonstrating that the results will create unbalance and lack of harmony in the poem and life alike. The dream deconstructs reality and becomes the true 'reality' for it is apparent from this poem that the speaker lacks faith in his outer realm and would rather depend on his inner one for succor and solace and he is asking all his readers to be strong and never to let go because if they do, they will be 'crippled' like the 'broken-winged bird/ That cannot fly' living in a 'barren field / Frozen with snow'.

At this stage, dreams are not personal or individualistic anymore, nonetheless, the dream becomes collective. The speaker is not addressing himself or addressing an imaginary speaker like the previous poem, but he is addressing the whole black community. Despite the fact that he seems to have been on the verge of dysphoria in the last phase, he discovered that if these dreams become shared by a huge number of people, only then, these dreams could become true. He is encouraging his people to stick to their dreams and never to let them go because it is in their dreams that their identity is reserved and their 'selves' restored. In his article "Of Dreams Deferred, Dead or Alive: African Perspectives on African-American Writers: A Review", Janis A. Mayes states:

As part of the whole process of constructing cleavage from Africa, the master tried to transform dreams into nightmares; ... the master forgot that lies could not triumph forever, especially given the lived and living nightmares of slavery and racism ... Perhaps more than any other African-American writer, Hughes describes with poignancy the nightmarish side of the Dream while insisting on the Black determination to fulfill it" (687).

In his poem 'Freedom's Plow', Hughes confesses that 'First in the heart is the dream / Then the mind starts seeking away' (9-10). This reflects his feelings of hopelessness in the past phase when he was desperate about his dreams getting realized. Then, he explicates:

Thus the dream becomes not one man's dream alone,  
But a community dream.  
Not my dream alone,  
but our dream.  
Not my world alone,  
But your world and my world,  
Belonging to all the hands who build. (21-27)

The metamorphosis then, takes place: the word 'alone' changes to 'community', 'my' becomes 'our', 'your' and 'all'. Thus, when he said in his poem 'Hope', 'Sometimes when I'm lonely, / Don't know why, / Keep thinking I won't be lonely' (1-3), he was correct. Even if he is alone in the real world, in his dreams, he is not alone because other people are sharing his dream with him.

## **Deconstructing the Inner and the Outer Realities**

In his psychological works, Carl Jung always referred to what is called a 'collective psychosis'. He repeatedly warned from this collective psychosis, maintaining that when people live in denial for a long time, surviving in oppression and suppression, then perhaps the result would be a break out in irrational behavior. A collective psychosis is a "closed system, which is to say that it is insular and not open to feedback from the 'real' world. Reflection from others, instead of being looked at and integrated, is perversely mis-interpreted to support the agreed-upon delusion that binds the collective psychosis together" (Levy). When a certain community or race fall collectively prey to fear and despair, they become easily manipulated and controlled by leaders who would play on their passive feelings of rage and indignation and hence, feed them on revenge and hatred.

In his famous poem, 'Dream Deferred', Hughes warns from that same outcome. "What happens to a dream deferred"? Because of the time in which this poem was written, (the birth of the Civil Rights Movement), one is aware that the act of pursuing one's dreams was an act that not everyone in American was allowed to do. Hughes gives suggestions of what will happen to a dream if it doesn't get realized: "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?" (2-11). As a consequence of them getting deferred, dreams will 'dry up', will 'fester' (cause pain), 'run away', 'stink', 'crust', become 'heavy loads' and eventually 'explode'. All these negative descriptions, besides the irregular meter and free verse used in the poem (eleven lines broken into four stanzas, the first and the last stanzas contain one line, some lines are short, some contain long lines, some have monosyllabic words, others are full of syllables), underpin Hughes' fear that people will not be able to stand inequality for a long time and

thus, expect them to 'explode' at any point. If 'legitimate' dreams of equality and freedom are not restored to the blacks, they are not going to wait any longer, but will take their rights in a manner that might be described as 'illegitimate'. At this point, the speaker denied his internal microcosm and denied his outer one as well. In fact, Langston Hughes devoted his poetic genius "to the realization of that dream deferred, the dream of racial equality" (Scott 1). It was a dream that brought him literary fame, even though it has not be realized until the present moment.

## CONCLUSION

This paper traced the five phases of dreams as presented by Langston Hughes in a number of his poems. Being regarded by many blacks as the 'Dean of Negro Writers in America' and the 'Negro Poet Laureate', Hughes was hopeful that his dreams as well as the dreams of all the black community would be realized. The dream motif has passed through a number of stages in an attempt to reconstruct reality, both in the internal as well as the outer levels. Although the dreams started as deeply personal, they ended up as collective ones and it is only at that stage that hope returned. It is suggested that Martin Luther King Jr. was very much interested in the poetry of Hughes and sometimes recited Hughes' poems in his sermons and especially in his famous speech 'I have a dream'. Would this testify, after all, that the dreams have become true?

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