

LÖSUNGEN: (American) Dreams in Langston Hughes "Harlem" as well as in "The Child"

Die Zeilenangaben aus "The Child" beziehen sich auf die Fassung in Green Line Oberstufe. Arbeitsheft Abiturthemen 2021. Klett Verlag. Da die Kurzgeschichte sehr kurz ist, können die Textstellen leicht auf die Fassungen des Cornelsen- oder Westermann-Verlages übertragen werden.

2. In his poem, Hughes suggests different consequences of a dream that has been deferred. Apart from the last line he makes use of similes to illustrate these effects which are all negative. In the course of the poem, the possibilities of what could happen to a dream deferred become worse.

It starts with the "drying out" of a dream, which can be seen as a disillusionment with one's dreams or hopes. The next effects include pain ("fester and run"), a stale aftertaste ("crust and sugar over") or the carrying of a heavy burden ("heavy load"). The peak is reached when the deferral of a dream results in violence ("or does it explode"?).

At first the dream deferred leaves a mark on an individual person but the last line suggests that it might also become a risk for the whole society.

Hughes' concept of a dream (deferred) does not refer to 'simple' daydreaming but to one's personal wishes and hopes for the future.

3. The message of "Harlem" is that a dream's deferral has negative and even destructive consequences for the individual. These lasting effects reach from disillusionment to constant pain or to a heavy burden to live with. The ultimate consequence might be the use of violence. As the poem is entitled "Harlem", the reference to the African American population is obvious. The date of publishing (1951) indicates that their dream deferred is probably the rejection of equal opportunities and thus a successful future, which are both essential aspects of the American dream.

In "The Child" (1993), Karen concludes that those dreams which are about "reaching the sky" (l.83) might only be for white people (l.86). She forbids herself to dream because "it didn't pay to be black and to dream. It didn't pay. What happened to you when the dream didn't come true? What did you do then?" (ll.105-107). Here Karen directly addresses Hughes' question of what might happen to a dream deferred. The answer, which is being suggested in her questions, would be that a dream deferred would leave her at best disillusioned but might also lead to bitterness and suffering.

However, despite her being cautious, she is having dreams for her daughter until she realizes that her mother might have had the same dreams for her. This again brings up 'the dream deferred' because it is very likely that Karen's mother's dreams for her daughter will not come true due to her (teenage) pregnancy (→ vicious circle).

At the very end of the short story Karen indulges in her personal American dream of success, which is about her driving over the George Washington Bridge, destination Hollywood, to design clothes for the stars. She then realizes herself that this is an unrealistic dream, one that she as a black pregnant teenager should not have because it is a dream deferred. As a result, she starts to cry.

Just as it is implied in "Harlem", Karen concludes that Black people like her should not have (American) dreams. For her these dreams end in frustration as they only give way to a painful truth.

4. individual answers

It is likely that Karen as a single mother won't be able to attend the High School for Fashion and Design. She might share her mother's fate and have several jobs in order to make ends meet. However, this missed chance to profit from a good education might be a continuing pain or burden for her. This might well lead to her feeling bitter and frustrated. As Karen seems to be a rather quiet and shy person, she will probably suffer silently. However, an explosion as she showed towards her mother when they had a fight about her pregnancy, cannot be ruled out.