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# Exploring Deferred Dreams: A Stylistic Analysis of Langston Hughes' Poem 'Harlem'

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## ABSTRACT

This paper presents a comprehensive stylistic analysis of Langston Hughes' poem "Harlem". Utilizing a qualitative descriptive approach through stylistic analysis, the study examined the poem across four linguistic levels: phonological, graphological, morphological, and lexico-syntactic. Phonological analysis highlights the use of rhyme, rhythm, and sound devices like alliteration, consonance, assonance, rhyme, and imagery and sound patterns emphasizing their role in conveying urgency and frustration. Graphological examination considers punctuation, capitalization, stanza form, lineation, and spatial organization of the poem, illustrating how they contribute to the poem's interpretive ambiguity. Morphological analysis investigates Hughes' deliberate word choices and their resonance with the African American experience and deferred dreams. Lexico-syntactic analysis explores sentence structures and the poem's symbolic language to reveal its commentary on social inequality and aspiration. This study contributes to the broader field of literary studies by providing the value of stylistic analysis in uncovering the depth of Hughes' artistic expression and the enduring relevance of "Harlem" in contemporary discourse on race and dreams.

*Keywords: Stylistic Analysis, Phonological Analysis, Graphological Analysis, Morphological Analysis, Lexico-Syntactic Analysis, Harlem, Langston Hughes*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Poetry, a widely appreciated literary genre, is characterized by its flexibility in form, complexity in

structure, multiplicity of meanings, and variety of musicality and wordplay. This inherent versatility allows for extensive analysis through various levels of stylistic examination. Style refers to the unique manner

in which language is used to effectively convey meaning, while stylistics is the study of these distinctive expressions in language.

James Mercer Langston Hughes (1902-1967) stands out as a prominent African-American writer and remains the most renowned African-American poet of the 20th century. His poetry served as a voice for his community, significantly influencing perceptions of and attitudes toward Black individuals. Hughes' works often centered on the aspirations and frustrations of African-Americans living in Harlem, a historically Black neighborhood in New York. His poem *Harlem*, first published in 1951 within his collection *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, is a lyric poem notable for its irregular rhyme scheme and sentence patterns.

In modern literary analysis, stylistic examination has emerged as a key approach to understanding poetic works (Rahmah et al., 2024; Simpson, 2014). Analyzing poetry through linguistic frameworks such as phonology, graphology, morphology, and lexico-syntax reveals intricate layers of meaning and technical artistry (Leech, 1969; Tallerman, 2015). This comprehensive perspective highlights the vital role of language in shaping a poem's depth and significance (Bradford, 2005; Cuddon, 1999).

Although previous studies on *Harlem* have explored its symbolic and cultural implications, they often overlook the linguistic strategies Hughes employs to evoke emotional intensity and thematic depth. A detailed stylistic analysis can reveal how Hughes skillfully manipulates linguistic features to enrich the poem's portrayal of frustration, aspiration, and societal critique. Addressing this scholarly gap, the current study conducts a stylistic analysis of *Harlem*, focusing on four linguistic levels: phonological, graphological, morphological, and lexico-syntactic.

This research sought to bridge the gap in comprehensive stylistic analysis by examining the interaction between these linguistic features and their role in shaping the poem's overall impact. According to Attridge (2004), such an integrated approach is essential for uncovering a poem's stylistic intricacies and understanding how they contribute to its effect.

The study aimed to deepen the understanding of Langston Hughes' artistic expression by analyzing his strategic use of language as a tool for emotional impact. It explored how Hughes employed phonological features to amplify the poem's thematic weight, examined the influence of graphological elements on reader engagement, investigated the role of morphological choices in shaping imagery, and analyzed how lexico-syntactic structures contributed to meaning and tone in "*Harlem*."

Guided by the central question—How do the stylistic elements across phonological, graphological, morphological, and lexico-syntactic levels enhance the meaning and emotional impact of Hughes' "*Harlem*"?—the research examined how sound patterns express emotions, how visual elements affect understanding, how word forms contribute to imagery, and how sentence structures develop key themes. By analyzing these stylistic features, the study uncovered the language techniques that enhance emotional impact and thematic depth.

Moreover, this research called for a linear perspective on interpreting such poems in English classrooms, advocating for an integrated approach that combines English grammar and literature. This approach emphasized the applicability and practicality of using Hughes' work as a reference in educational settings, enriching students' understanding of both linguistic structures and literary artistry. Ultimately, this study

sought to provide a better understanding of Hughes' craft while offering meaningful contributions to literary studies and classroom instruction.

### *1.1. Stylistic Techniques in Harlem*

Poetry, as a medium, allows scholars to explore how linguistic choices enhance artistic expression and thematic depth. Zahara (2023) conducts a morphological analysis of Harlem, examining Hughes' use of free, bound, and functional morphemes. The study shows that Hughes' precise word choices amplify the emotional weight of the poem, effectively capturing the pain and frustration of unfulfilled aspirations. Similarly, Jose and Jose (2024) offer a stylistic analysis of T.S. Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, exploring phonological, graphological, and lexico-syntactic features. While Eliot's work reflects personal existential dilemmas, Hughes' stylistic simplicity in Harlem focuses on collective struggles, making his message direct yet deeply resonant.

### *1.2. Thematic and Social Reflections in Hughes' Harlem*

Hughes' Harlem stands as a poignant critique of racial and societal inequalities, particularly in mid-20th-century America. Amaliyah (2024) explores how Hughes uses metaphor and imagery to symbolize the deferred dreams of African Americans, presenting the poem as both a lament and a call to action. Zahara (2023) reinforces this idea, noting that Hughes' accessible language belies a profound commentary on social and cultural frustrations. By combining simplicity with emotional urgency, Hughes transforms a singular experience into a collective narrative that resonates across generations.

### *1.3. Sound and Structure: Phonological and Graphological Insights*

The auditory and visual elements of Harlem further enrich its impact. Pfeiler (2003) examines Hughes' use of rhyme, rhythm, and assonance, highlighting how sound patterns create a sense of tension and musicality that reflect the poem's emotional core. In addition, Kendall (2005) studies Hughes' graphological techniques, such as enjambment and punctuation, which disrupt the poem's flow to mirror the disarray caused by deferred dreams. These stylistic elements reveal Hughes' ability to use language with precision, combining form and content to create a lasting emotional impression.

### *1.4. Broader Context and Global Connections*

Hughes' exploration of deferred dreams aligns with broader literary discussions on oppression and identity. Alsouhi and Alamri (2024) situate Harlem within post-colonial theory, connecting its themes to global narratives of resistance and resilience. Sharma (2018) highlights how Hughes' use of metaphor and syntactic simplicity transforms a specific cultural experience into a universal plea for justice and equality. Through this approach, Harlem becomes not only a critique of racial injustice but also a timeless expression of shared human struggles.

### *1.5. Integration of Stylistic Analysis in Teaching Langston Hughes' "Harlem" in English Classrooms*

The integration of stylistic analysis in teaching Langston Hughes's poem "Harlem" can significantly enhance students' understanding of both English grammar and literature. For example, Sharma (2018) explores how Hughes's use of various stylistic devices, including phonological and syntactic elements, contributes to the poem's emotional depth and thematic richness. This analysis not only aids in grasping the poem's meaning but also reinforces grammatical concepts such as sentence structure and function. Similarly, a study by

Rangkuti et al. (2023) emphasizes the importance of morphological elements in Hughes's work, illustrating how morphemes shape the imagery and emotional resonance within the poem. By examining these stylistic features, educators can create a more engaging and relevant curriculum that connects linguistic structures to literary artistry. This approach encourages students to appreciate the interplay between language and meaning, ultimately fostering a deeper understanding of both the mechanics of English and the cultural significance of literary texts.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative, descriptive approach through stylistic analysis to examine the linguistic features of Langston Hughes' "Harlem." The analysis was organized into four key frameworks, each focusing on a different linguistic aspect: phonological, graphological, morphological, and lexico-syntactic. These frameworks were applied to explore how Hughes' stylistic choices enhance the poem's themes, emotional resonance, and overall effect.

### 2.1. Phonological Analysis

The phonological analysis focused on the sound patterns in Langston Hughes' "Harlem," including elements such as alliteration, assonance, consonance, and rhyme. Drawing on Crystal's (2011) definition of phonology as the study of sound systems in language, the analysis examined how Hughes employed these sound features to structure the poem's rhythm and tone. Key phonological elements, such as the repetitive use of sounds, were explored to understand their role in shaping the poem's mood and reinforcing its themes.

### 2.2. Graphological Analysis

The graphological analysis focused on the visual presentation of Langston Hughes' "Harlem," including

punctuation, capitalization, stanza structure, lineation, and the spatial organization of the text. Following the approach of Jeffries and McIntyre (2010) in stylistic analysis, this study examined how these visual elements influenced the reader's interpretation of the poem's structure and emotional undertones. Particular attention was given to how the poem's form and punctuation choices corresponded with its thematic concerns.

### 2.3. Morphological Analysis

The morphological analysis focused on the word formation in Langston Hughes' "Harlem," including the use of specific types of words such as nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs, along with their prefixes and suffixes. This approach followed Bauer's (2017) morphological theories to examine how the word choices in the poem support its themes. For instance, the use of vivid and impactful verbs and adjectives in "Harlem" serves to emphasize the intensity of the deferred dreams and the emotional weight of the poem's central message.

### 2.4. Lexico-Syntactic Analysis

The lexico-syntactic analysis examined the vocabulary choices and sentence structures in Langston Hughes' "Harlem." This analysis drew on Halliday's (2014) systemic functional linguistics, focusing on lexical choices and syntactic patterns. The study explored how specific words and their arrangement within the poem contribute to its thematic elements, particularly in how the language reflects the tensions and emotions conveyed by the speaker. It also examined the simplicity and directness of Hughes' language and how it helps emphasize the poem's central concerns.

### 2.5. Data Collection and Analysis

The primary data for this study consisted of the text of Langston Hughes' "Harlem." The analysis was conducted through close reading, focusing on instances within the poem that illustrate key phonological, graphological, morphological, and lexico-syntactic features. The findings were contextualized within existing literary criticism and linguistic theory, with interpretations supported by relevant scholarly sources.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

#### 3.1. Phonological Level

To analyze Langston Hughes' "Harlem" through phonological features, the following details were observed based on Leech and Short's (2016) framework for phonological analysis. The analysis included key phonological elements like alliteration, assonance, consonance, and rhyme. This examination focused on how these sound patterns enhance the thematic and emotional impact of the poem, particularly its exploration of the consequences of deferred dreams.

##### 3.1.1. Alliteration

Alliteration is the repetition of initial consonant sounds in a sequence of words. It adds rhythm and musicality to poetry, making it more engaging for readers. This technique can emphasize key themes and create memorable phrases, enhancing the overall experience of the poem.

*"What happens to a dream deferred?"* (Line 1)

*"Does it dry up"* (Line 2)

*"like a syrupy sweet?"* (Line 8)

*"like a heavy load."* (Line 10)

The repeated 'd' sounds in "dream," "deferred," "Does," and "dry" create a rhythmic and reflective tone,

reinforcing the central theme of unfulfilled aspirations. Similarly, the 's' sounds in "syrupy" and "sweet" produce a smooth, almost hypnotic effect that contrasts with the decay and frustration earlier in the poem, emphasizing the lingering, cloying nature of deferred dreams. The recurring 'l' sounds in "like" and "load" mirror the heaviness and burden associated with postponed goals. These alliterative patterns enhance the poem's auditory appeal while deepening its emotional resonance, encouraging readers to focus on the psychological weight and societal implications of deferred dreams. By intertwining sound with meaning, Hughes enriches the poem's structure and amplifies its power to evoke introspection and empathy, making the struggles it portrays both poignant and relatable.

##### 3.1.2. Assonance

Assonance refers to the repetition of vowel sounds within closely placed words. This technique can create a musical quality and evoke specific emotions, enhancing the imagery and themes present in a poem.

*"Does it dry up / like a raisin in the sun?"* (Lines 2-3)

The long 'i' and 'a' vowel sounds in these lines create a sense of longing and sadness. This assonance enhances the emotional weight of the imagery, allowing readers to feel the pain associated with dreams that have not come to fruition, making the experience more relatable and poignant.

##### 3.1.3. Consonance

Consonance is the repetition of consonant sounds, typically at the end or middle of words, which can create rhythm and reinforce thematic elements in poetry. It often contributes to the overall mood and tone of a piece.

*"like a raisin in the sun?"* (Line 3)

*"Or crust and sugar over—" (Line 7)*

The 'n' sound in "raisin" and "sun" creates a sense of connection between the two words, linking the imagery of a dried-up raisin to the intense heat of the sun, symbolizing the withering of a deferred dream. The sharp consonant sounds in this line reflect the unpleasant realities tied to deferred dreams. The repetition of 's' and 'r' evokes feelings of decay and disappointment, reinforcing Hughes' portrayal of the emotional turmoil that arises when aspirations are delayed or denied.

#### 3.1.4. Rhyme

Rhyme involves the repetition of similar sounds at the end of lines or phrases, which can create a musical quality and enhance memorability. It often serves to emphasize key ideas or emotions within a poem.

*"Does it stink like rotten meat? / Or crust and sugar over—" (Lines 6-7)*

*"Maybe it just sags / like a heavy load. / Or does it explode?" (Lines 9-11)*

The irregular rhyme scheme in these lines creates a rhythmic flow that propels readers forward while juxtaposing contrasting images. This interplay between rhyme and content emphasizes the tension between hope and despair, highlighting the complexities inherent in the theme of deferred dreams. The perfect rhyme between "load" and "explode" at the end of lines 10 and 11 provides a powerful conclusion to the poem. The pairing of these words emphasizes the potential outcomes of deferred dreams—either they continue to weigh heavily on individuals or they lead to an explosive release of unexpressed frustration. This rhyme reinforces the poem's central theme of the potentially destructive consequences of unfulfilled aspirations.

#### 3.1.5. Imagery and Sound Patterns

Imagery involves using descriptive language that appeals to the senses, while sound patterns enhance this imagery through auditory effects. Together, they create vivid mental pictures that resonate emotionally with readers.

*"Maybe it just sags / like a heavy load." (Lines 9-10)*

*"Or does it explode?" (Line 11)*

These lines use vivid imagery to evoke both visual and tactile sensations, connecting sound patterns with feelings of heaviness. The final line, with its explosive sound, underscores the potential for dramatic consequences when dreams are continually denied, leaving readers with a powerful sense of urgency about the impact of unfulfilled aspirations.

The phonological features discussed in the study, including alliteration, assonance, consonance, and rhyme, demonstrate how Langston Hughes effectively explores the theme of deferred dreams in "Harlem." These sound techniques not only enhance the poem's themes but also elicit deep emotional responses from readers, helping them connect with the struggles of unfulfilled aspirations within the African American experience. For instance, the use of strong consonant sounds in phrases like "dry up" and "like a raisin in the sun" resonates with the poem's emotional core, amplifying the urgency and despair surrounding Hughes' powerful questions about dreams that are put on hold. This aligns with findings from Sahabuddin and Rahman (2022), who highlight how these phonetic elements create a rich auditory experience that reinforces the poem's message, inviting readers to engage with significant social issues on a profound level.

Incorporating literary criticism and linguistic theory can deepen this discussion. The use of rhetorical questions



throughout the poem serves not only to engage readers but also to reflect the speaker's psychological detachment and concern for the community's future, a technique noted by critics like James Smethurst, who contextualizes Hughes' work within the socio-political landscape of Harlem during a time of unrest. Furthermore, Hughes' employment of denotation and connotation reveals layers of meaning behind each metaphorical comparison of a deferred dream—such as likening it to "rotten meat" or "a raisin in the sun"—which evokes instinctive reactions that underscore the emotional weight of unfulfilled aspirations. This aligns with Cognitive Linguistics, which posits that language shapes thought; thus, Hughes' strategic phonetic choices not only convey despair but also invite readers to viscerally experience the implications of deferred dreams on identity and community. By employing these stylistic devices, Hughes avoids overt repetition while implicitly conveying the feelings of Black individuals, ultimately fostering a deeper understanding of both the poem's content and its broader cultural implications.

### 3.2. Graphological Level

Langston Hughes' poem "Harlem" utilizes various graphological elements that significantly influence how readers interpret and engage with the text. This analysis focused on punctuation, capitalization, stanza form, lineation, and spatial organization of the poem, demonstrating how these features shape the reader's experience. Drawing from Müller and De Smet's (2016) framework, the following detailed analysis explored how these elements shape the reader's experience of the poem.

#### 3.2.1. Punctuation

Punctuation in poetry serves not only to clarify meaning but also to create pauses and emphasize certain

phrases. In "Harlem," Hughes uses dashes and question marks effectively.

*"What happens to a dream deferred?"* (Line 1)

*"Does it dry up / like a raisin in the sun?"* (Lines 2-3)

*"Or fester like a sore—"* (Line 4)

*"Does it stink like rotten meat?"* (Line 6)

*"Or crust and sugar over—"* (Line 7)

*"Maybe it just sags / like a heavy load."* (Lines 9-10)

*"Or does it explode?"* (Line 11)

The dash at the end of Line 4 creates a pause that invites contemplation, emphasizing the uncertainty surrounding deferred dreams before transitioning to the next idea. Similarly, the question mark in Line 5 reinforces the poem's interrogative nature, prompting readers to reflect on the consequences of unfulfilled aspirations and creating a sense of urgency. The opening question sets the tone for the entire poem, inviting readers to explore the possible outcomes of delayed dreams. Its question mark highlights the open-ended nature of the inquiry, reflecting the complexity and uncertainty of the issue.

In Line 2, the question mark further extends this inquiry, introducing the first of several similes that consider different fates for a deferred dream. This continuation builds a rhythm of exploration and reflection. Like Line 4, Line 2 ends with a dash that implies a question, encouraging readers to contemplate the imagery and its implications. While Lines 9–10 do not end with a question mark, they maintain the sequence of potential outcomes, leading to the poem's final and most impactful question in Line 11. This closing question, marked by a question mark, underscores the dramatic, explosive consequences of

deferred dreams. It leaves a lasting impression, emphasizing both the urgency and the danger inherent in aspirations left unfulfilled.

### 3.2.2. Capitalization

Capitalization can signal importance or denote specific themes within a poem. Hughes employs capitalization strategically to highlight key concepts.

*"What happens to a dream deferred?"* (Line 1)

*"Does it dry up"* (Line 2)

*"Maybe it just sags"* (Line 9) and *"like a heavy load."* (Line 10)

*"Or fester like a sore—"* (Line 4)

*"Or crust and sugar over—"* (Line 6)

*"Or does it explode?"* (Line 11)

The capitalization of "What" at the beginning of the poem establishes an authoritative tone, framing the inquiry as significant and deserving of thoughtful consideration. This choice immediately engages readers with the poem's central question about dreams, setting a serious tone that resonates throughout the text. Each line begins with a capital letter, even if it continues the previous line. This consistent capitalization underscores the importance of every question and statement, emphasizing that each possible outcome of a deferred dream is significant and warrants reflection.

The phrase "Maybe it just sags" introduces a new thought, with capitalization at the beginning marking its significance. The continuation "like a heavy load." follows the same pattern, reinforcing the emotional and physical burden that unfulfilled dreams can impose. Additionally, the word "Or" begins several lines, introducing alternative possibilities for what might

happen to a deferred dream. By using "Or," Hughes highlights the range of potential consequences, from festering and crusting over to exploding, emphasizing the uncertainty and varied outcomes of unfulfilled aspirations. This deliberate use of capitalization and transitions deepens the poem's thematic exploration, encouraging readers to consider the profound impact of deferred dreams.

### 3.2.3. Stanza Form

The structure of stanzas can influence how a poem is read and understood. Hughes uses a free verse format, which allows for flexibility in expression.

The poem is divided into multiple stanzas, each containing varying numbers of lines.

This free verse structure reflects the fluidity of thought and emotion tied to dreams. The varying lengths of the stanzas create a rhythm that mirrors the unpredictability of life and aspirations, allowing readers to experience the ebb and flow of hope and despair as they journey through the poem.

The first stanza (Lines 1-8) consists of a series of rhetorical questions exploring the potential fates of a deferred dream. Its extended length creates a sense of accumulation, reflecting the build-up of frustration and tension that accompanies unfulfilled dreams. Each question adds a layer of complexity, urging readers to consider multiple possibilities. In contrast, the second stanza, *"Maybe it just sags / like a heavy load."* (Lines 9-10), provides a moment of reflection. The brevity of this stanza emphasizes the weight and burden of deferred dreams, creating a pause for contemplation before the poem's dramatic conclusion. The third stanza, *"Or does it explode?"* (Line 11), is a single, isolated line that delivers a powerful and abrupt conclusion. This final line stands out, underscoring the explosive potential of deferred



dreams, heightening the sense of urgency and leaving a lasting impact on the reader.

#### 3.2.4. Lineation

Lineation refers to how lines are broken up in a poem, affecting pacing and emphasis. Hughes uses line breaks to create emphasis on certain phrases.

"What happens to a dream deferred?" (Line 1)

"Does it dry up / like a raisin in the sun?" (Lines 2-3)

"Or fester like a sore—" (Line 4)

"Maybe it just sags / like a heavy load." (Lines 9-10)

"Or does it explode?" (Line 11)

The opening line, a complete thought and direct question, immediately engages the reader and sets the stage for the poem's exploration of deferred dreams. Its self-contained nature emphasizes the weight of the question, highlighting its central role in the poem. The use of enjambment in lines 2 to 3, where a phrase flows from "dry up" to "like a raisin in the sun" without terminal punctuation, creates a sense of movement and rhythm. This seamless transition maintains the poem's flow while emphasizing the vivid imagery of a drying raisin. In line 4, the dash creates a pause, inviting reflection on the unpleasant imagery of a festering sore, adding dramatic tension and underscoring the lingering pain of deferred dreams. Similarly, the line break after "sags" draws attention to the word, allowing readers to pause and consider its implications before continuing. This technique deepens the emotional resonance of burdened dreams, enhancing the impact of imagery. Finally, the standalone concluding line, a powerful question, emphasizes the explosive potential of deferred dreams, leaving a dramatic and memorable impression.

#### 3.2.5. Spatial Organization

The spatial arrangement of text on the page can influence how readers visually engage with a poem. Hughes' layout contributes to its overall impact.

The poem features uneven spacing between lines and stanzas.

*"Or does it explode?"* (Line 11)

The spatial organization of the poem creates visual tension that mirrors the thematic tension of deferred dreams. The irregular spacing encourages readers to navigate the text thoughtfully, reflecting the struggle embedded in the poem's subject. This layout enhances engagement by prompting readers to consider the significance of each line as they progress. The final line, isolated and set apart from the preceding stanzas, underscores the climactic question about the explosive potential of deferred dreams. Its visual separation draws immediate attention, ensuring readers reflect on the dire consequences it suggests. This strategic placement heightens the urgency and dramatic tension, leaving a lasting impact as the poem concludes.

The graphological elements discussed—punctuation, capitalization, stanza form, lineation, and spatial organization—demonstrate how Langston Hughes effectively shapes reader interpretation and engagement in "Harlem." These features not only clarify meaning but also enhance emotional resonance, inviting readers to connect deeply with the theme of deferred dreams. Through these graphological techniques, Hughes amplifies his message about unfulfilled aspirations, encouraging reflection on their broader social implications within the African American experience. This is supported by Sharma (2018), who notes that the irregular line lengths and stanza forms in "Harlem" contribute to its emotional weight, suggesting a reflection of the chaos and frustration surrounding deferred dreams. The study emphasizes that Hughes'

unique formatting choices serve to heighten the poem's impact, allowing readers to experience the sense of urgency and despair inherent in the struggle for fulfillment.

To further enrich this analysis, incorporating literary criticism and linguistic theory can provide deeper insights into Hughes' stylistic choices. For example, the use of enjambment creates a sense of continuity and urgency, compelling readers to move swiftly from one line to the next, which mirrors the relentless nature of deferred dreams. Scholars such as Henry Louis Gates Jr. have pointed out that Hughes's work often reflects broader cultural narratives; thus, these graphological choices serve as a microcosm of African American experiences during a time of social upheaval. Additionally, applying Semiotic theory allows for an exploration of how Hughes' formatting acts as a visual signifier of emotional states; the spacing and layout can be interpreted as representations of fragmentation in both personal and collective identities. By integrating these theoretical perspectives, a more nuanced understanding emerges regarding how Hughes' graphological elements not only convey meaning but also evoke profound emotional responses related to aspiration and identity within the African American community.

### 3.3. Morphological Level

Langston Hughes' poem "Harlem" employs various morphological choices that significantly influence its imagery and thematic development. This analysis focuses on the use of different types of words, including nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs, as well as their prefixes and suffixes. Utilizing Bauer's (2017) framework for morphological analysis, this examination reveals how these elements shape the reader's

understanding of deferred dreams and their emotional consequences.

#### 3.3.1. Nouns

Nouns serve as the foundation of imagery in poetry, providing concrete representations of abstract concepts. In "Harlem," Hughes uses vivid nouns to evoke strong visual images.

*"dream"* (Line 1)

*"raisin," "sore," "meat," "sugar," "load"* (Lines 2, 4, 5, 6, 10)

The word "dream" symbolizes the aspirations, hopes, and goals that people cherish and strive for—a universal concept that resonates with anyone who has ever longed for a better future. The poem centers on the question posed in the opening line, "What happens to a dream deferred?" By invoking "dream," Hughes immediately sets the stage for a poignant exploration of the consequences of postponed or unfulfilled aspirations. The specific nouns Hughes employs create vivid imagery that captures the impact of deferred dreams. For instance, "raisin" evokes something once vibrant that has shriveled away, while "sore" suggests pain and decay. These carefully chosen words not only paint a striking picture but also symbolize the emotional and physical toll of unfulfilled dreams, particularly within the context of the African American experience.

#### 3.3.2. Verbs

Verbs indicate action and contribute to the dynamic quality of the poem. Hughes employs strong verbs that evoke movement and change.

*"dry up," "fester," "stink," "crust," "sags," "explode"* (Lines 2-11)

The choice of verbs like “dry up” and “fester” illustrates deterioration, while “explode” suggests a sudden, violent release of pent-up frustration. This range of action words captures the various states a deferred dream can experience, from passive decay to explosive frustration, effectively conveying the emotional journey associated with unfulfilled hopes.

### 3.3.3. Adjectives

Adjectives enhance imagery by providing descriptive qualities to nouns, enriching the reader's understanding of the themes presented.

“rotten,” “syrupy,” “heavy” (Lines 5, 6, 10)

“deferred” (Line 1)

The adjectives “rotten” and “syrupy” create contrasting images—one evoking decay, the other suggesting sweetness that has thickened into something cloying and unappealing. This juxtaposition highlights the complexity of deferred dreams, which may initially seem sweet or desirable but ultimately lead to disappointment and despair. Similarly, the adjective “heavy” underscores the weight and burden that unfulfilled aspirations impose on individuals. Central to the poem is the word “deferred,” which means to put off, delay, or postpone. This term signifies the postponement of action or fulfillment, introducing the theme of unfulfilled dreams and the lingering consequences of leaving them unresolved.

### 3.3.4. Adverbs

Adverbs modify verbs and adjectives, adding depth to the actions described in the poem.

“just” (Line 9)

The adverb “just” in the line “Maybe it just sags / like a heavy load.” (Lines 9-10) serves to emphasize the state

of being without embellishment or exaggeration. This choice reflects a resigned acceptance of reality, suggesting that deferred dreams may simply exist as burdens without any dramatic flair. It underscores a sense of inevitability regarding their impact on individuals.

### 3.3.5. Prefixes and Suffixes

The use of prefixes and suffixes can alter meanings and intensify themes within a poem.

“deferred” (Line 1)

The word “deferred” itself carries significant weight due to its suffix “-ed,” which indicates a completed action or state. This choice highlights that dreams are not merely postponed but have reached a state where they are no longer active or pursued. The morphological structure thus emphasizes a sense of finality regarding lost opportunities, deepening the thematic exploration of hopelessness in the face of systemic barriers faced by African Americans.

The morphological features discussed—nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and prefixes/suffixes—demonstrate how Langston Hughes effectively enhances imagery and thematic development in “Harlem.” These word choices not only create vivid pictures but also convey deep emotional resonance regarding deferred dreams. Through these morphological techniques, Hughes captures the struggles associated with unfulfilled aspirations within the African American experience, inviting readers to reflect on broader social issues related to hope and despair. This is supported by Zahara, Hidayat, and Rangkuti (2023), who conducted a morphological stylistic analysis of “Harlem” and found that the predominant use of free morphemes, particularly functional ones, plays a crucial role in conveying the poem's themes. Their research highlights

how Hughes' careful selection of morphemes contributes to the emotional depth of the poem, allowing readers to engage more profoundly with its exploration of deferred dreams and the socio-political implications surrounding them.

To deepen this discussion, integrating literary criticism and linguistic theory can provide additional layers of understanding. The employment of semantic fields—where specific words evoke particular emotions or concepts—enables Hughes to create a rich tapestry of meaning that resonates with the reader's experiences. Critics such as David Levering Lewis have noted that Hughes's use of everyday language reflects the lived realities of African Americans, making the poem relatable and impactful. Furthermore, applying Functional Linguistics allows for an examination of how Hughes's choice of morphemes serves not just grammatical purposes but also ideological functions; each word choice reinforces themes of struggle and resilience. This approach aligns with Cognitive Linguistics, which posits that language shapes thought; thus, Hughes's morphological choices guide readers' emotional responses and reflections on their own aspirations. By incorporating these theoretical perspectives, a more comprehensive understanding emerges regarding how Hughes's morphological features not only enhance imagery but also engage readers in a profound dialogue about hope and despair within the African American experience.

### 3.4. Lexico-Syntactic Level

Langston Hughes' poem "Harlem" utilizes various lexico-syntactic structures that play a crucial role in constructing meaning, conveying tone, and developing themes. This analysis focuses on vocabulary choices and sentence structures, drawing from Eggins' (2004) framework for lexico-syntactic analysis. By examining

how words are organized and the types of words used, this analysis reveals how Hughes effectively communicates the emotional weight of deferred dreams.

#### 3.4.1. Vocabulary Choices

The selection of specific words contributes significantly to the poem's overall impact. Hughes employs vivid and evocative vocabulary that enhances imagery.

Key vocabulary includes: "*raisin*," "*sore*," "*explode*," "*dream*," "*stink*," "*heavy*," and "*sugar*."

Hughes's choice of nouns, verbs, and adjectives creates vivid visual and sensory images that bring the poem's themes to life. For example, "*raisin*" evokes something once vibrant that has withered, while "*sore*" suggests pain and decay. Verbs like "*explode*" convey urgency and the potential violence of unfulfilled aspirations, adding a sense of tension. These carefully chosen words allow readers to vividly imagine the consequences of deferred dreams. Central to the poem, "*dream*" encapsulates the aspirations and hopes questioned throughout, setting the stage for an exploration of what happens when these dreams remain unfulfilled. Words like "*stink*" immediately engage the reader's sense of smell, creating a vivid and unpleasant image, while "*heavy*" conveys the intense emotional burden that deferred dreams impose, suggesting a weight that oppresses the mind and soul. The word "*sugar*," initially symbolizing sweetness, takes on a more complex meaning as it crusts over, implying a deceptive allure that eventually loses its appeal and value over time.

#### 3.4.2. Sentence Structures

The structure of sentences in "Harlem" contributes to the poem's rhythm and flow, enhancing its emotional resonance.

The poem primarily consists of interrogative sentences, with a few declarative sentences towards the end.

*"Does it dry up / like a raisin in the sun?"* (Lines 2-3)

*"Or fester like a sore—"* (Line 4)

*"Does it stink like rotten meat?"* (Line 5)

*"Or crust and sugar over— / like a syrupy sweet?"* (Lines 6-7)

*"Or does it explode?"* (Line 11)

Hughes begins with the rhetorical question, "What happens to a dream deferred?" This opening sets an introspective tone, inviting readers to reflect on the implications of delayed dreams. The use of interrogative structures throughout the poem creates a sense of urgency and inquiry, compelling readers to engage deeply with its themes. These rhetorical questions establish a rhythmic pattern, with each question building on the last to sustain a sense of anticipation and reflection. This technique emphasizes the uncertainty surrounding deferred dreams and the range of potential outcomes. The shift to declarative sentences, such as "Maybe it just sags / like a heavy load" (Lines 9–10), provides a moment of pause and reflection, underscoring the emotional and physical weight of unfulfilled aspirations. By alternating between questions and statements, Hughes creates a contemplative yet dynamic tone that invites readers to ponder the profound consequences of deferred dreams.

#### 3.4.3. Use of Similes

Similes serve as a powerful tool for comparison, enhancing imagery and thematic development.

Hughes employs multiple similes: "like a raisin in the sun," "like a sore," "like rotten meat," "like a syrupy sweet" and "like a heavy load."

Each simile in the poem draws a direct comparison between deferred dreams and tangible objects or experiences, making abstract concepts more relatable. For instance, likening a deferred dream to "a heavy load" illustrates the burden of unfulfilled aspirations while evoking the weariness of carrying such emotional weight. These comparisons enrich the reader's understanding of the profound emotional consequences tied to postponed dreams. By crafting these vivid similes, Hughes engages the reader's senses and emotions, effectively deepening the thematic exploration of the poem and conveying the lasting impact of deferred dreams.

#### 3.4.4. Tone Conveyance

The lexico-syntactic choices contribute to the overall tone of the poem, which oscillates between contemplation and urgency.

The tone is established through questioning and vivid imagery.

The repeated use of questions creates an inquisitive tone that reflects uncertainty and concern about the fate of deferred dreams. Coupled with evocative imagery, this tone resonates with feelings of frustration and despair. The final line, "Or does it explode?" (Line 11), introduces an explosive quality that heightens tension, leaving readers with a lingering sense of urgency about the consequences of unfulfilled aspirations.

#### 3.4.5. Thematic Development

The lexico-syntactic structures contribute to the overarching themes of the poem, particularly regarding hope, despair, and the consequences of deferred dreams.

Themes are reinforced through structured comparisons and vivid language.



Hughes' choice to frame the poem around questions about dreams allows for an exploration of their potential outcomes—whether they decay quietly or erupt violently. The structured comparisons serve to illustrate not only what happens when dreams are deferred but also highlight societal implications for African Americans facing systemic barriers. This thematic depth is achieved through careful attention to word choice and sentence structure.

The lexico-syntactic features discussed—vocabulary choices, sentence structures, use of similes, tone conveyance, and thematic development—demonstrate how Langston Hughes effectively constructs meaning in "Harlem." By utilizing specific word forms and structures, Hughes captures the emotional weight associated with deferred dreams while engaging readers in a profound exploration of hope and despair. Through these lexico-syntactic techniques, he invites reflection on broader social issues related to unfulfilled aspirations within the African American experience. This is further supported by Sharma (2018), who notes that Hughes employs active interrogative sentences to engage readers directly with the poem's central questions. The study highlights how the rhythmic repetition of phrases, particularly with the word "does," creates a sense of urgency that reinforces the emotional depth of the inquiries posed throughout the poem. Such syntactic choices not only enhance the lyrical quality of "Harlem" but also deepen its exploration of social and personal implications surrounding unfulfilled aspirations.

To expand on this discussion, various literary criticisms and linguistic theories can be applied to further illuminate Hughes's techniques. The strategic use of rhetorical devices, such as repetition and parallel structure, serves to heighten the poem's emotional impact and underscore its themes. Scholars like David

Levering Lewis have highlighted how these techniques reflect the collective voice of African Americans grappling with systemic inequalities, thereby situating Hughes's work within a broader socio-political framework. Moreover, examining Hughes' language through the lens of Pragmatics reveals how context shapes meaning; his choice of direct address invites readers to engage in a dialogue about their own aspirations and frustrations. Additionally, Discourse Analysis can be employed to explore how the interplay between form and content in Hughes's writing creates a powerful commentary on identity and social justice. By integrating these critical perspectives, readers can gain a richer understanding of how Hughes' lexico-syntactic features not only construct meaning but also resonate with the lived experiences of those confronting deferred dreams.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The research into Langston Hughes' poem Harlem revealed how his artistic expression and language explores complex themes of deferred dreams and their emotional consequences. The analysis focused on the poem's phonological, graphological, morphological, and lexico-syntactic features, highlighting how these elements work together to deepen the poem's thematic and emotional impact. Phonological techniques such as alliteration, assonance, consonance, and rhyme create a rhythmic quality that draws readers in, while harsh sounds associated with decay and disappointment emphasize the pain of unfulfilled aspirations. Graphological elements like punctuation, capitalization, stanza form, and lineation add visual tension, enhancing the reader's connection to the themes of hope and despair. Hughes' careful selection of words, such as "raisin," "sore," "stink," and "explode," evokes strong sensory responses and symbolizes the emotional toll of deferred dreams. The lexico-syntactic structure,



particularly the use of interrogative sentences and similes, conveys uncertainty and complexity, inviting reflection on broader social issues.

This analysis demonstrates Hughes' mastery in using linguistic techniques to explore the consequences of deferred dreams, making Harlem a powerful commentary on the struggles of African Americans in their pursuit of aspirations. The poem continues to invite interpretation and reflection on human emotion and societal challenges.

The results of this study have significant implications for teaching English grammar and literature, particularly in helping students understand how linguistic elements can shape meaning and emotional impact in a text. By analyzing Langston Hughes' Harlem, educators can highlight the importance of phonological, graphological, morphological, and lexico-syntactic features in both literary analysis and language instruction. The study demonstrates how sound techniques, visual formatting, word choices, and sentence structures work together to enhance thematic depth and emotional resonance. In the classroom, this approach can foster a deeper appreciation of the relationship between form and content, encouraging students to critically engage with texts on a linguistic and interpretive level. Additionally, it provides a model for examining how language reflects broader cultural and social contexts, offering students valuable insights into the power of language as a tool for exploring complex human experiences.

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The authors have declared that there is no conflict of interest.

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