

Dreams and the Dreamers Who Dream Them

Jennie Moran

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All writers have dreams. In fact, often dreams are the sole purpose for authoring works. The use of literature to bring about wanted change in society has long been in practice and has proven to be a very effective mode of persuasion. However, sometimes this process is delayed, and the dreams desired take more time to come true than was originally intended. This process of waiting--and hoping--is described in Langston Hughes' poem "Dream Deferred," in which Hughes explains what happens in the meantime while one waits for a dream to ripen:

"Dream Deferred"
 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? (Hughes)

Nowhere is this theme so prevalently displayed than in the African American literature of the past century. In the works by Shelby Steele, Frederick Douglass, Martin Luther King Jr., Zora Neale Hurston, Brent Staples, and Malcolm X, the desire for change and progress for the black community of their time is apparent. However, in all cases their dreams have been delayed and each author uses a different method to endure this unexpected hindrance. As presented in the poem, these means of perseverance vary widely from anger to indifference. Each author's technique of dealing with time is evident in his/her respective work. The unique answers to the initial question, "What happens to a dream deferred?", may be applied to these works of literature in order to understand how these individuals persisted through the extensive phase of waiting in order to eventually see their dreams come true (Hughes).

There are several explanations in the subsequent lines of the poem to answer this question of dreams deferred. The first possibility is that the dream shrivels up the way a raisin does. This opening observation is demonstrated by Steele in his work, "On Being Black and Middle Class." Steele desires freedom from the double-bind he struggles with between racial status and class status. As he describes in his essay, to be black was but a mere shadow of what he felt was his potential as a middle class citizen, yet to achieve his full capabilities of class was to leave his racial identity behind: "As a middle class black [he has] often felt [him]self contriving to be 'black'" (Steele 376). Suffering from this severe heat and pressure to be both of the mutually exclusive portions of himself concurrently, Steele becomes a mere shadow of himself, neither wholly black, nor entirely middle class. His capacity to be his whole self lies shriveled and forgotten, as a grape wrinkles to a raisin under the intensity of the sun.

The second portion of the poem answers the question as though the dream becomes an oozing wound. This segment applies to Douglass, whose dreams of freedom tormented him each day. In "Learning to Read and Write," Douglass' newly found knowledge of freedom is described in several painful ways, including it being a "wretched condition, without remedy" and "even more painful than the one

[ignorance] of which I was relieved” (102-103). The anguish of waiting was as torturous and agonizing to his soul as a festering sore would be to one’s body.

Interestingly, Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” applies to the subsequent lines of the poem about rancid meat. Similar to the putrid fumes of decay that do no damage to the body, yet the foul stench is one that cannot be overlooked, King seeks to “dramatize the issue so that it can no longer be ignored” (175). His non-violent actions and protests were always in mind, yet causing no harm. This constant reminder serves to achieve his dream by persisting through time, like a stinking smell, impossible to get rid of, until the heart of the matter is dealt with.

Quite contrary to the previous sequence of answers, the next lines about creating a sugary glaze may be applied to Hurston’s work, “How It Feels to Be Colored Me.” In this text, Hurston describes herself as not belonging to “the sobbing school of negrohood,” nor is she “tragically black” (159). She feels that, though the current situation may not be perfect, it is still not something to be ashamed of as exemplified in the passage: “Someone is always at my elbow reminding me that I am the granddaughter of slaves. It fails to register depression with me” (Hurston 160). While waiting for the dream of true equality to be achieved, Hurston finds the current situation to be nonetheless sweet. Hurston has no time to “look behind and weep,” rather she is enjoying the fruits of her ancestors’ success while on her own path to true delight (160).

Unlike Hurston’s view, the fifth answer to the deferred dream question mentions that the weight of a dream yet to come true is wearying and cumbersome. Staples’ narrative, “Just Walk on By: Black Me and Public Space,” describes the burden associated with the modern stereotypes of his race. Though these prejudices are not created without some fundamental truths, “these truths are no solace against the kind of alienation that comes of being ever the suspect” (363-364). The dangers that Staples’ blackness creates are an obstacle for him to overcome, causing him to have to alter his activities and to conform in order to ease the white society’s anxieties. In addition, his constant task of taking “precautions to make [him]self less threatening” and the depreciating work of assimilation make Staples’ race an evident burden and his delayed dreams of tolerance an exhausting load (365).

The final answer to the poem questions if the extensively awaited dream could be delayed so long that it would reach a breaking point and blow up. This idea is analogous to many of the feelings described in Malcolm X’s work “Learning to Read.” As a fervent segregationist, Malcolm X’s dream to rid himself and his race of the influence, control, and oppression of whites often erupts into violent ideas. This hatred and malice is displayed through the numerous times he refers to the white population as “devils” (Malcolm X 250-251). There is rarely a passage throughout his entire essay that does not set forth a barrage of negative ideas towards whites. Whether they are “piratical opportunists” or off “pillaging and raping and bleeding and draining the world’s nonwhite people,” so much loathing and pent up rage surely cannot result in peaceful confrontation (Malcolm X 250-251). It is just a matter of time before this dream, so long awaited, detonates.

“What happens to a dream deferred?” is obviously a question with an answer that depends on who the dreamer is (Hughes). The wide variety of awaited hopes displayed through these different authors as well as their approaches to passing the time while waiting for their dreams to come true, shows how literature can best prod along the necessary evolution of one race’s aspirations. It is inevitable that writers, both black and white, will express their desires through their essays in order to hasten those ideals that have become deferred. However, the best part about dreams deferred is that they are only delayed, not deleted.

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