**Name**: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ **Date: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**Homeroom**: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ **Class: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

***Poetry Unit:* Langston Hughes**

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| **Lesson Objective:** Explore theme and variation across a set of poems.  |

**Do Now**

**Directions:** Read this article about Langston Hughes, then answer the questions below.

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| 1936 photo by Carl Van Vechten**Langston Hughes** by *The Poetry Foundation[[1]](#footnote-1)*Langston Hughes was a central figure in the Harlem Renaissance, the flowering of Black intellectual, literary, and artistic life that took place in the 1920s in a number of American cities, particularly Harlem. A major poet, Hughes also wrote novels, short stories, essays, and plays. He sought to honestly portray the joys and hardships of working-class Black lives, avoiding both **sentimental idealization** and negative stereotypes. As he wrote in his essay, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” “We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn’t matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too.” […]*Langston Hughes*Hughes […] recorded faithfully the nuances of black life and its frustrations. In Hughes’s own words, his poetry is about "workers, **roustabouts**, and singers, and job hunters on **Lenox Avenue in New York, or Seventh Street in Washington or South State in Chicago**—people up today and down tomorrow, working this week and fired the next, beaten and baffled, but determined not to be wholly beaten, buying furniture on the **installment plan**, filling the house with roomers to help pay the rent, hoping to get a new suit for Easter—and **pawning** that suit before the Fourth of July." […]Hughes brought a varied and colorful background to his writing […] As [author and critic] David Littlejohn observed […]: "Hughes’s creative life [was] as full, as varied, and as original as **Picasso’s**, a joyful, honest monument of a career. There [was] no noticeable sham in it, no **pretension**, no self-deceit; but a great, great deal of delight and smiling irresistible wit. […] Hughes’s [greatness] seems to derive from his […] unity with his people. He seems to speak for millions, which is a tricky thing to do.”**sentimental idealization**:portraying life in a way that seems ideal but is not realistic**roustabouts:** people who work at seaports or oil fields**Lenox Avenue in New York…:** major streets in majority Black neighborhoods **installment plan:** paying for something in set amounts over a long period of time**pawning:** giving an object to someone in exchange for money, in hopes of buying the object back at a later time**Picasso:** artist from Spain who became famous for modern art that broke the rules of traditional painting**pretension:** thinking you are more important, successful, or impressive than you actually are |

1. In your own words, describe the subject(s) that Hughes wrote about.

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1. Explain the meaning of this line: Hughes’s poetry is about “people up today and down tomorrow, working this week and fired the next, beaten and baffled, but determined not to be wholly beaten.”

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**Cycle 1**

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| **Dreams** (1922)SubjectSpeakerAudienceHold fast to dreams For if dreams dieLife is a broken-winged birdThat cannot fly.Hold fast to dreams *5*For when dreams goLife is a barren fieldFrozen with snow.**barren:** empty and unable to produce life |

1. a. The phrase “hold fast” means to tightly secure something so that it does not get lost or broken. What do you think it means to “Hold fast to dreams”?

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1. **Turn and Talk:** What kind of dreams does the speaker seem to be talking about? How important are dreams to the speaker of the poem? How do you know?

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| **Notes** |

**Challenge:** Consider what you learned about the Harlem Renaissance in yesterday’s lesson. Why might “holding fast” to one’s dreams be an important message for Hughes to communicate to his readers?

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1. Reread lines 3-4 and the altered version below:

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| **Original** | **Altered** |
| *Life is a* ***broken-winged*** *birdThat cannot fly.* | *Life is a birdThat cannot fly.* |

1. What is the difference between a “broken-winged bird” and a bird that cannot fly? Why might that difference be important to the poem?

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1. Explain what Hughes might be trying to convey in the **metaphor** of the broken-winged bird.

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**Cycle 2**

**Annotation Task:** While you read the poem “Dream Variations” (1926), underline references to day and night.

1. In one clear sentence, explain the dream this speaker describes in this poem.

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1. a. **Turn and Talk:** Review your annotations of descriptions of day and night. What patterns do you notice?

 b. How would you describe the speaker’s relationship with night? Why might they feel this way?

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1. In literature, night is often associated with scary, dangerous, or negative forces. How is Hughes’s description of night different, and why might this be?

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1. **Turn and Talk:** What connections do you see between “Dreams” and “Dream Variations”? Consider both the themes and the structure.

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| **Notes** |

**Cycle 3**

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| **Harlem** (1951)*“Harlem” is one of Hughes’ most well-known poems. As you read, consider similarities and differences between “Harlem” and the other poems we have read today.***deferred:** delayed or put off to do at later time**fester:** become more painful or infected as time passesSubjectSpeakerAudience |

1. a. Underline the **similes** that Hughes uses to describe dreams in this poem. Which **simile** is most compelling to you? Why?

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1. **Turn and Talk:** What do the **similes** have in common? Why do you think that is?



1. How is the last line different from the rest of the poem? Why do you think Hughes might have written it this way? Think about both structure and theme.

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1. The table below shows the year in which each poem was written and the age at which Hughes published it. Imagine these poems all share the same speaker, communicating these ideas over the course of 49 years. What “story” might they tell when read together? How does the speaker’s point of view seem to change over time?

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| **Poem** | **Year Written** | **Hughes’s Age** |
| “Dreams” | 1922 | 21 years old |
| “Dream Variations” | 1926 | 25 years old |
| “Harlem” | 1951 | 50 years old |

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**Challenge:** Would you consider these poems **melancholic**? Why or why not?

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1. **Turn and Talk:** The title of the final poem in this set is “Harlem.” Why might this title be significant?

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| **Notes** |

1. Why do you think a poet might return to the same theme or idea multiple times over the course of their life?

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**Homeroom: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Class: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**Exit Ticket**

1. In 3-5 sentences, explain how “Dreams,” “Dream Variations,” and “Harlem,” are variations on a similar theme. Consider similarities and differences in both the ideas and structures of the poems.

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1. “Langston Hughes,” *The Poetry Foundation,* <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/langston-hughes>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)