

Dream Variations



POEM TEXT

- 1 To fling my arms wide
- 2 In some place of the sun,
- 3 To whirl and to dance
- 4 Till the white day is done.
- 5 Then rest at cool evening
- 6 Beneath a tall tree
- 7 While night comes on gently,
- 8 Dark like me—
- 9 That is my dream!

- 10 To fling my arms wide
- 11 In the face of the sun,
- 12 Dance! Whirl! Whirl!
- 13 Till the quick day is done.
- 14 Rest at pale evening . . .
- 15 A tall, slim tree . . .
- 16 Night coming tenderly
- 17 Black like me.

and peace. His dancing implies his desire to reject the expectations of white society, while his resting at night represents the importance of finding a sense of home within the Black community. This speaker's dream, then, is a dream of dauntless Black selfhood in the face of an oppressive world.

The speaker dreams of dancing throughout the "white day" of dominant white society, openly and vibrantly expressing himself in spite of racism and oppression. The speaker's depiction of the daylight as "white" conveys the harsh glare or oppressive gaze that white society casts on the Black speaker. This description also subtly suggests that white society owns the day.

Yet the speaker refuses to defer to this "white day" and the oppression it represents. Instead, he dreams of "fling[ing] his arms" open wide in a gesture of freedom and defiance, joyfully dancing in the sun's "face"—or in the face of white society as a whole. The energy and openness of the speaker's dancing suggest that he defies the racist norms of white culture. He refuses to make himself small in the face of white standards and white oppression.

Though the speaker imagines defying the "white day," the poem also suggests that he seeks a place away from the glare of the day—a place where he can find safety and a sense of belonging. Ultimately, the speaker finds this in the night, which is "Black" as he is. This night, which the speaker says is "Black like me," can be read as representing Black community and identity. Within this community, the speaker is no longer scrutinized for his Blackness. Instead, he is simply seen as "me," as who he is, and can rest in a sense of shared identity and experience. The "gentl[eness]" and "tender[ness]" of this night suggest that the Black community offers the speaker comfort, safety, and relief. Importantly, though, in the poem's second "variation" on the speaker's dream, the speaker imagines *also* being able to rest "at pale evening." This suggests that the speaker imagines a society in which he can find freedom and rest *all* the time. The word "pale" connects the evening to the earlier image of the "white day." The speaker hopes for a time when he can "rest" always, even alongside white people, without fear of racist violence, scrutiny, and discrimination.



SUMMARY

I dream of spreading my arms wide somewhere in the sunlight, of spinning and dancing until the day's bright, white light is over. Then I would relax in the refreshing cool air of evening, underneath a big tree, while night softly arrived, a night as dark as I am. That's my hope and my vision!

I dream of spreading my arms wide, right in front of the sun. I would dance, spin, and spin some more until the short day was over. I would rest in the dimly-lit evening underneath a big, slender tree. Then night would gently arrive, a night that is Black just like I am.



THEMES



RESISTING RACIST OPPRESSION

In "Dream Variations," a Black speaker dreams of dancing all through the "white day" before resting in a night as "dark" as he is. [Metaphorically](#) speaking, the "white day" represents the racist society in which the speaker lives; the speaker is dreaming of a time and place free of such discrimination, in which he can find a sense of joy, belonging,

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-17



BLACK ART, JOY, AND SURVIVAL

While the speaker of "Dream Variations" envisions a life free of racial oppression, he also dreams of ways to survive the oppression that currently exists. The poem

suggests that the speaker's art—both his dancing and the art of this very poem itself—helps him get by in a racist society and imagine a better future. Art, the poem implies, is a powerful force through which the speaker comes to a deeper sense of Black community, identity, and joy.

The speaker makes it through the "white day" and the oppression it represents by dancing, whirling around until the day is "done." This joyful, energetic movement suggests that he turns to vibrant artistic expression to survive and thrive in a racist world.

The speaker's dancing also shifts the focus of the poem away from the "white day" and the white society it represents, instead centering the *speaker's* experience and creativity. This suggests that the speaker's art, his creative expression, allows him to retain a sense of autonomy and freedom. And notice how, in the second of the poem's "variations," the speaker changes the phrase "white day" to "quick day." This suggests that as the speaker continues to dance—as he becomes more deeply immersed in both his dream and his art (and the poem at hand)—he can envision a time free of white dominance, in which white culture no longer owns the day at all. The speaker's artistic joy, then, creates a sense of possibility, vision, and hope.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-17



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

*To fling my arms wide
In some place of the sun,*

The poem's title lets the reader know that the poem will be about the speaker's "dream"—a vision of the life he most wishes for. But this will also be a poem with "variations": slightly different versions of this dream. The word "variations" immediately connects the poem to the musical traditions of jazz and the blues—genres that work with themes and patterns, as well as *variations* on these themes. That connection to musical traditions born in the Black community links the speaker's dream to Black art and identity.

The poem will borrow stylistically from these musical forms, too. The blues often use lightness, humor, and syncopated rhythms to convey painful experiences, and the poem will do the same. The speaker will envision a future of freedom, lightness and ease, while simultaneously hinting at the pain of his current reality, in which he can only dream of this possibility.

In the poem's opening lines, the speaker begins to describe this dream. He imagines himself "fling[ing]" his arms "wide" in a gesture of openness and freedom. Then, he describes how he

would do this "[i]n some place of the sun." This second line suggests that he yearns for "some place" on earth—some place "under the sun," as the saying goes—where he could experience this freedom and ease. The [alliterative sibilance](#) of /s/ sounds in "some" and "sun," as well as the [assonance](#) of /uh/ sounds in both words, lends his longing a gentle music.

LINES 3-4

*To whirl and to dance
Till the white day is done.*

Still in his dream, the speaker imagines how he would "whirl" and "dance" until the "white day is done." This freewheeling dance evokes the liberated openness the speaker dreams of experiencing. The [anaphora](#) of "to," which repeats from the first line of the poem and appears here twice ("To whirl and to dance") creates a momentum that mirrors the energy of the speaker's dancing.

This anaphora also creates [parallelism](#) between the poem's first two lines and lines 3 and 4, which make up the poem's opening [quatrain](#). Both the first line and the third lines of this quatrain begin with the word "to" and describe some action the speaker dreams of taking ("To fling my arms wide," "To whirl and to dance").

This parallel structure creates a sense of patterning in the poem, yet also calls attention to what changes *within* the parallelism: in the poem's third line the speaker describes *two* actions (whirling and dancing) instead of just one (flinging open his arms). This shift speeds the poem up and gives it a sense of urgency, making the speaker's dance seem more and more energetic.

This increase in urgency and momentum leads the speaker to a crucial moment in the poem, when he describes the day as "white." This whiteness could be the harsh white light of the sun at midday, but it also clearly [alludes](#) to oppressive white society. That "white day" can be read as a [metaphor](#) for white culture as a whole: the speaker dreams of "danc[ing]" and "whirl[ing]" to get through this "day," or to survive the racist white society all around him. The fact that the speaker imagines surviving this "white day" through dancing—a form of art—suggests that it is the speaker's art that sustains him.

In these lines, [alliteration](#) connects the /t/ sounds in "To" and "Till," the /w/ sounds in "whirl" and "white" and the /d/ sounds in "dance" and "done." Subtly, this alliteration reinforces the idea that the speaker's dancing helps him to get through the "white day," since in each case, the first word in the alliterative pair connects to the speaker's actions ("to whirl" and "to dance"), and the second word ("[t]ill," "white," and "day") relates to the "white day"—what the speaker dreams of surviving.

This fourth, [end-stopped line](#) of the poem ("Till the white day is done") ends the first quatrain, and also establishes the poem's [rhyme scheme](#). Within the quatrain, "sun" rhymes with "done,"

setting up a rhyming pattern that follows an ABCB structure. This rhyme scheme creates a sense of evenness and steady pacing—a pattern that the poem will go on to repeat and transform.

LINES 5-6

*Then rest at cool evening
Beneath a tall tree*

After dancing through the “white day,” the speaker imagines finally being able to “rest,” in the “cool evening.” The image of the “cool evening” contrasts with the harsh, white glare of the day, suggesting that the speaker dreams of finding some space of reprieve, away from the oppressive gaze of white society. These lines also shift the poem away from the [parallelism](#) that drove the first four lines, implying that the speaker, too, has shifted away from that established pattern and the energy of his dancing, to a place of comfort and relief.

The speaker envisions finding this place of relief “Beneath a tall tree.” The [alliterative](#) /t/ sounds in “tall” and “tree,” combined with the [consonance](#) in “rest” call attention to this image. At the same time, the tree perhaps subtly [alludes](#) to a history of violence that is the *opposite* of the relief and peace the speaker imagines: the image of the “tall tree” might evoke the history of lynching and other brutal acts of violence against Black people. In the speaker’s dream, though, he is alone in this natural space, and the tree has become a place not of terror and violence, but of peace and relief.

These lines continue the [rhyme scheme](#) established by the previous four. Yet where the first four lines followed an ABCB rhyme scheme, the sounds at the ends of these two lines are very similar. The [assonance](#) of the long /e/ sounds in “evening” and “tree,” in fact, creates an effect close to [slant rhyme](#)—almost a DD rhyme—suggesting that the poem has begun to subtly change the pattern it has set up.

LINES 7-9

*While night comes on gently,
Dark like me—
That is my dream!*

The speaker envisions how, while resting underneath the tree, night would gradually and “gently” fall over the scene. This night, the speaker says, is “Dark like me.”

This “darkness” contrasts with the “white day” mentioned in line 4 and suggests that the night, too, can be read [metaphorically](#). If the “white day” represents the oppressive white society that the speaker must survive, the “night” can be read as representing the Black community within which the speaker finds a place of safety, belonging, and shared identity. The fact that the speaker describes the night’s darkness as a [simile](#) (it’s dark *like* him) reinforces this sense of shared identity.

According to the pattern the poem has set up via its rhyme

scheme, readers the stanza should end after the word “me,” with the conclusion of its second [quatrain](#). Yet this quatrain contains an additional line—making it technically a quintain, or a five-line stanza: the speaker goes on to say, of everything he has just described, “That is my dream!”

The long /e/ sound in “dream” connects this line musically to the preceding four lines, each of which also contains a long /e/ sound in its closing syllable (“tree,” “gently,” “me”). The continued [assonance](#) of long /e/ sounds fills these lines with a sense of music. The lines simply sound good and harmonious, reflecting the fact that the speaker has finally found a place of belonging and rest within this dark night when it arrives.

This pattern also marks a shift away from the ABCB structure at the poem’s opening, suggesting that the poem has moved into a different kind of music—a variation on the very structure it set up. This “extra” line also echoes jazz or blues music. Instead of strictly following a pattern or theme, it keeps extending and varying its own rhythmic structure.

Finally, the last line of the stanza reaffirms that everything the speaker has described here is, in fact, his “dream.” This affirmation conveys the sense of hope and possibility within the poem, as the speaker envisions a life of freedom and self-expression, free from the strictures and threat of white society. At the same time, the line reminds the reader that this is *only* a “dream,” a hope the speaker has that is beyond his current reality. The line conveys *both* the speaker’s dream and the pain of his reality at once.

LINES 10-11

*To fling my arms wide
In the face of the sun,*

The speaker begins to describe the second “variation” of his dream. The first line of this stanza directly repeats the first line of the poem, as the speaker dreams of “fling[ing] [his] arms wide.” This [parallelism](#) lets the reader know that the speaker is describing the same dream that he described in the first stanza, but now in a slightly varied form. This repetition also brings the reader back to the image that opened the poem, of the speaker throwing open his arms in a gesture of openness and freedom.

Line 11 (“In the face of the sun”) then reveals the first slight shift within this “variation” on the speaker’s dream. In the first stanza, the speaker had imagined opening his arms in “**some place** of the sun.” This line conveyed the speaker’s longing for a place where he could experience such self-expression and ease. Here, though, the speaker imagines opening his arms in “**the face** of the sun.” This conveys a kind of joyful defiance of the sun and the “white day,” as well as the oppressive society this “white day” represents.

The word “face” also creates an [internal rhyme](#) with the word “place” from the first stanza. This rhyme calls attention to the *difference* between the two words, suggesting that rather than

searching for such a place where such freedom might be possible, the speaker now envisions himself flinging his arms open right in front of the sun, regardless of where he is. This varied version of the speaker's dream, then, subtly shifts the poem's mood from a *longing* for freedom to a joyful, resistant *enactment* of this freedom within the poem itself.

LINES 12-13

*Dance! Whirl! Whirl!
Till the quick day is done.*

The speaker continues to describe this new variation on his dream. As in the first stanza, he envisions himself dancing and spinning about until the day is over. Yet these two lines include several important changes from their earlier iterations.

First, instead of envisioning his dancing with the slower and more paced “[t]o whirl and to dance,” here the speaker describes the dance through three one-word commands: “Dance! Whirl! Whirl!” he says. These short, staccato sentences, intensified by the [repetition](#) of “Whirl!” suggest that the speaker is, in the dream, dancing with even more energy, and also that in a way he is *already* dancing within the poem.

The next line is closer to its earlier version from the first stanza, but also includes an important change. Where before the speaker imagined dancing “[t]ill the **white** day is done,” here he reimagines the day not as “white” but “quick.” This removal of the word “white” implies that in the speaker's dream, white society is no longer dominant and no longer “owns” the day; instead, the day is just a day, that passes quickly through the speaker's dancing.

The poem reflects this idea of quickness and speed through its rhythms. The first two lines of this stanza have the same number of syllables as the first two lines in the prior stanza. The third line of the second stanza (“Dance! Whirl! Whirl!”), however, has only three syllables. By contrast, the third line of the first stanza has five syllables (“To whirl and to dance”). This shift in line length—which also corresponds with the poem dropping the [anaphora](#) of “to” that appeared in the first stanza—speeds the poem up. The poem has begun to not just describe but also to *embody* the speaker's dream through the energy of its rhythm and music.

Several poetic devices also add to the poem's musical quality. [Alliterative](#) /d/ sounds connect “Dance,” “day,” and “done,” reinforcing the idea that the speaker dances through the day, and until the day is over, to reach a place of greater comfort and peace. [Consonance](#) of the /l/ sound in “Whirl” and “Till” also convey this idea, suggesting that through the art of his dancing, the speaker is able to reach the point when the day is at an end.

LINES 14-15

*Rest at pale evening...
A tall, slim tree...*

As in his first “variation” on his dream, the speaker imagines resting at the end of the day, underneath a tree. Since this stanza has proceeded in the same order as the first stanza (the speaker imagining opening his arms in the sun, then dancing, and then resting), the poem continues to make use of [parallelism](#) and patterning. These two lines, though, once again include important changes—a.k.a. “variations”—from their earlier versions.

First, while in the first stanza the speaker described this part of his dream using complete grammatical phrases (“Then rest at cool evening / Beneath a tall tree”), here he imagines this moment in a sequence of two sentence fragments, each of which ends with ellipses: “Rest at pale evening... / A tall, slim tree...” After the momentum and increased energy in the preceding lines, these ellipses slow the poem down, creating a kind of pause or rest like the one the speaker describes within the poem itself.

At the same time, the [imagery](#) in the lines changes. Instead of the evening being “cool,” it is now “pale,” a word that interestingly recalls the description of the day as “white.” Perhaps this shift suggests that in the speaker's dream, he can now rest anywhere, including in an evening that is “pale” or [metaphorically](#) connected with white society. This shift suggests that the speaker dreams of a life free of racial discrimination and segregation, where he can rest and find peace and safety no matter where he is.

The speaker also now describes the “tall tree” from the first stanza as a “tall, slim tree.” Note the [consonance](#) of /t/ and /l/ sounds, with the /l/ of “tall” repeating in “slim,” and the /t/ of “tall” repeating in “tree.” This consonance helps to convey the natural grace and beauty of the tree, further distancing it from associations with historical violence, and suggesting that in the speaker's dream, the tree is a place of comfort.

LINES 16-17

*Night coming tenderly
Black like me.*

The speaker again imagines night arriving while he rests under a tree. Where before he described the night as coming “gently,” here he depicts it as arriving “tenderly,” a word that is close in meaning to “gently” but suggests an even greater degree of comfort and care. This line is shorter than its earlier version (the speaker has omitted the words “while” and “on”). Yet in this new version, the speaker seems to not only *imagine* night arriving; it is as though, within the moment of the poem, night is “coming” closer to him, and actually approaching.

As at the end of the first stanza, these lines end with [assonant](#) long /e/ sounds, creating rhymes between “tree,” “tenderly,” and “me,” as well as a [slant rhyme](#) with “evening.” This again adds music and emphasis to these lines, and thus to the speaker's vision at the end of the poem.

In the poem's final line, the speaker describes the night as "Black like me." Earlier in the poem, the speaker described the night as "Dark." This shift in language is important, as the speaker asserts his Black identity directly for the first time in the poem. And here, importantly, is where the poem ends. Rather than mentioning, as he did at the end of the first stanza, that this is the "dream," the speaker stops at the moment that the "Black" night actually *does* arrive— suggesting that in a way, the dream is alive and real through the poem itself.



SYMBOLS



DANCING

The speaker's dancing [symbolizes](#) joy and freedom. The speaker dreams of finding "some place" where he can be free under "the sun," and in this place, he imagines himself dancing with gleeful abandon, "whirl[ing]" and spinning. This dance doesn't just express freedom, but also a kind of exuberant resistance. The speaker dances through the "white day" and then in "the face of the sun." In other words, his dance defies the day and the racist white society that day represents. The speaker's dancing also represents art more broadly. The poem suggests that it is through his creative art—his dancing—that the speaker is able to survive the "white day" and reach the Black night, and the Black community and safety that it represents.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "To whirl and to dance"
- **Line 12:** "Dance! Whirl! Whirl!"



THE TREE

On one level, the "tall tree" the speaker imagines resting under simply [symbolizes](#) the natural world. Alone under this tree, the speaker is free from the social constructs that lead to segregation and racism. The tree also evokes the vitality of the speaker's dream and implies that his dream will continue to grow until it becomes a reality. In this way, the poem *reclaims* the tree as a symbol of life. The image of a tree might evoke lynchings, gesturing to the terrible history of white violence against Black Americans. But through his dream, the speaker transforms the tree into a symbol of rest, safety, beauty, and hope for a better future.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-6:** "Then rest at cool evening / Beneath a tall tree"
- **Lines 14-15:** "Rest at pale evening . . . / A tall, slim tree . . ."



POETIC DEVICES

METAPHOR

[Metaphor](#) is an important part of in "Dream Variations." First, the speaker describes dancing through the "white day" until it is over. The fact that the speaker describes the day as "white" suggests that the day is a metaphor for white society as a whole. The Black speaker envisions himself surviving life within this racist white society through his art—his dancing.

By contrast, the speaker welcomes the night, which is "Dark" and "Black like [him]." The night, then, can be read as a metaphor for the Black community, in which the speaker finds a sense of safety, belonging, and shared identity.

The speaker extends both of these metaphors throughout the poem, as he refers to both the "day" and the "night" in stanzas 1 and 2. But the poem also subtly *changes* these metaphors. In the second stanza, though the speaker imagines dancing through the day, he no longer describes the day as "white"; instead, it is "quick." At the same time, the night (and he himself) change from "Dark" to "Black." These subtle changes imply that as the speaker comes to a stronger sense of his identity, and a stronger sense of belonging within the Black community, the dominant white society holds less power over him.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "white day"
- **Lines 7-8:** "While night comes on gently, / Dark like me—"
- **Line 13:** "quick day"
- **Line 14:** "pale evening"
- **Lines 16-17:** "Night coming tenderly / Black like me."

SIMILE

The speaker uses two memorable [similes](#) to describes the night: first, that it is "Dark like me," and then that it is "Black like me." These similes suggests that the "Black" night is a time of freedom and release: the "white day" is a time of work and effort, but night is restful and peaceful.

The speaker's similes emphasize the sense of belonging, shared identity, and likeness he feels with the night—and by extension, with the Black community that this night represents. The similes also suggest that while the night is like the speaker, the "white day"—and the white society it represents—are *unlike* the speaker. In other words, while the speaker can never find a sense of complete belonging within a dominant white society, he can "rest" in the "Dark" of night, of his community.

These similes appear at the end of both stanzas—and thus at the end of the poem as a whole. This placement calls attention to the similes and emphasizes the speaker's newfound sense of joyful comfort. By ending with the simile "Black like me," the

poem conveys the speaker's relief at finding himself at home in the world, and emphasizes how this dream of freedom is inextricably connected to a sense of identity and belonging in the Black community.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "Dark like me"
- **Line 17:** "Black like me."

ANAPHORA

[Anaphora](#) appears throughout "Dream Variations," creating rhythm and emphasis and evoking the energy of the speaker's wild, whirling dance.

Most notably, the speaker repeats the word "to" at the beginning of lines 1 and 3 ("To fling," "To whirl") and also at the beginning of the third line's second clause ("to dance"). This anaphora gives the poem momentum as the speaker begins to describe his dream. Anaphora here conveys the energy urgency of the speaker's dance.

It makes sense, then, when the anaphora drops away toward the end of the first stanza, when the speaker imagines himself resting as night arrives. Here, his attention shifts from his own actions to his gorgeous, peaceful surroundings.

The poem's anaphora is also tied to its broader [parallelism](#). Both stanzas start with a version of the same phrase:

To fling my arms wide
In [...] sun,

This patterning links the two "Dream Variations"—but it also highlights what's *different* in the poem's second variation on the dream. The poem shifts away from its use of anaphora in the second stanza and generally speeds up, suggesting that the speaker is more immersed both within his dance and the dream itself.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "To"
- **Line 3:** "To," "to"
- **Line 10:** "To"

PARALLELISM

The poem's [parallelism](#) is an important part of its structure, allowing the speaker to build these two "Variations" on his dream.

When the speaker describes his dream of dancing in the first stanza, he does so through a sequence of infinitives: "To fling," "To whirl," and "to dance." This parallelism ("To + verb related to movement") emphasizes the energy and vibrancy of the speaker's dream. It also suggests that this dream is unified and

whole, as each part of the dance seems to lead into the next.

Parallelism also works on a larger scale in the poem. The second stanza has a very similar structure to the first—even opening with lines that are very nearly identical to the poem's first:

To fling my arms wide
In the face of the sun,

Each stanza then moves in the same way, with the speaker first dreaming of "fling[ing]" his arms open in the sunlight, dancing until the day is over, resting under a tree, and experiencing comfort and relief at night. Many of the lines in the second stanza are close to direct repetitions. All this parallelism links these two versions of the speaker's "dream"—and calls attention to their differences.

For instance, instead of the longer and slower line "To whirl and to dance," this line's second iteration uses three quick exclamations: "Dance! Whirl! Whirl!" This shift speeds the poem up and also suggests that the speaker not only *dreams* of dancing, but *is* in a sense "dancing" through the poem itself, feeling its joyful rhythm.

Other slight changes in the second stanza shift the poem's rhythms. For instance, line 14 in the second stanza repeats the idea of resting beneath a tall tree, but ends with ellipses, making this moment of rest seem elongated: both the speaker and reader pause and take a breather.

These rhythmic changes connect to the poem to the musical traditions of jazz and the blues. Both of these genres begin by introducing themes or patterns, and then shift and change those patterns. In its "variations," the poem creates a kind of blues song on the page.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-8
- Lines 10-17

JUXTAPOSITION

The poem uses [juxtaposition](#) to highlight the difference between the "white day," which represents dominant white society, and the "night," which can be read as representing the Black community.

The poem juxtaposes day and night not just through their whiteness and blackness, but through the speaker's actions, comparing how the speaker gets through the white day—which is by dancing—with how he finds relief with the arrival of night. This juxtaposition emphasizes the difference between the dominant white society, which the speaker must survive through his art, and the Black community, in which the speaker finds a sense of shared identity and safety.

As the poem goes on, it also plays with these juxtapositions. For

example, in the second stanza, the speaker describes the evening as “pale,” an antonym of “Dark,” which described the night in the first stanza. Since “pale” is closer to “white,” the speaker shifts the terms of the poem here, suggesting that he dreams of resting not only in the night that is “Black like [him]” but also in a time or place more closely aligned with white society. In other words, the speaker dreams of a time in which racism and segregation no longer exist.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4
- Line 5
- Lines 7-8
- Lines 10-13
- Line 14
- Lines 16-17

IMAGERY

The poem's [imagery](#) makes the speaker's dream vivid and palpable.

The speaker imagines dancing in the sunlight until the “white day” is over. This image conveys the harsh bright light of the day—and, by extension, the cruel gaze of the white society it represents. His dance under that sun isn't just a dance, but an energetic “whirl” that suggests his joyful defiance.

Then, the speaker envisions himself resting in the “cool evening” underneath a “tall tree” until night arrives “gently” and “tenderly.” Here, the evening isn't cold, but deliciously “cool,” and the tree isn't just tall but “slim” and graceful. These images of bodily comfort and the beauty of nature contrast with the glare of that “white day,” and tangibly evoke the speaker's relief at the arrival of the night, which represents his feeling of security and acceptance in the Black community.

The speaker often uses images taken from the natural world here, imagining the freedom and ease he feels when he is alone in nature. This natural imagery implies that racism and white supremacy are social constructs. In his dream, alone in nature, the speaker can be free of these oppressive social constructs and experience belonging and safety.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** “white day”
- **Line 5:** “cool evening”
- **Line 6:** “tall tree”
- **Lines 7-8:** “While night comes on gently, / Dark like me”
- **Line 14:** “pale evening”
- **Line 15:** “tall, slim tree”
- **Lines 16-17:** “Night coming tenderly / Black like me.”

END-STOPPED LINE

The poem uses [end-stopped lines](#) to manage its pacing, to create rhythm, and to draw attention to important moments.

End-stops here often mark moments of special emphasis. The first stanza, for example, is almost evenly divided into two sentences: the first ends when the white day is “done” in line 4, and the second ends with the speaker's “dream”—marked with an emphatic exclamation point. These end stops draw attention both to the finality of the white day's end and to the beauty and excitement of the speaker's dream. The emphatic dash in line 8 makes that effect even stronger:

While night comes on gently,
Dark like me—
That is my dream!

That dash both connects the “dream” to what has come before and sets it apart, giving the speaker's joyful cry its own space.

The second stanza moves differently. Here, an exclamation point ends “Dance! Whirl! Whirl!” in line 12. This enthusiastic end-stop conveys the wild energy of the speaker's dancing. That energy runs into drawn-out pauses in lines 14 and 15:

Rest at pale evening . . .
A tall, slim tree . . .

These languorous ellipses slow the poem down dramatically before its ending, when the speaker imagines the night approaching, “Black like me.” All of these shifts in pacing build toward the poem's conclusion, and the relief the speaker finally finds in the approaching night.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** “done.”
- **Line 8:** “me—”
- **Line 9:** “dream!”
- **Line 12:** “Whirl!”
- **Line 13:** “done.”
- **Line 14:** “evening . . .”
- **Line 15:** “tree . . .”
- **Line 17:** “me.”

ALLITERATION

“Dream Variations” uses [alliteration](#) throughout to create music and meaning. For example, in the first stanza, [sibilant](#) alliteration connects “some” and “sun,” communicating the speaker's longing for “some place” under the “sun” where he can experience such freedom and openness.

Then, alliteration helps to convey how the speaker's dancing allows him to survive the “white day.” In lines 3 and 4, the poem creates alliterative clusters, between “whirl” and “white,” and

“dance,” “day,” and “done.” In each of these clusters, the first word in the grouping (“whirl,” “dance”) relates to the speaker’s actions, his dancing. The second (and third) words in the clusters (“white,” “day,” and “done”) have to do with what the speaker is surviving *by* dancing: the white day, and the white society it represents.

This alliteration creates a kind of dance within the poem, evoking how the speaker survives life in this racist society and reaches the “night” where he can belong. The poem emphasizes this sense of belonging through another instance of alliteration, as /d/ sounds connect “[d]ark” and “dream”: the speaker’s dream, this alliterative moment suggests, is of finding this kind of comfort and community in the “[d]ark” night and the Black community that it represents.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** “some,” “sun”
- **Line 3:** “whirl,” “dance”
- **Line 4:** “white,” “day,” “done”
- **Line 6:** “tall tree”
- **Line 8:** “Dark”
- **Line 9:** “dream”
- **Line 10:** “fling”
- **Line 11:** “face”
- **Line 13:** “day,” “done”
- **Line 15:** “tall,” “tree”
- **Line 16:** “tenderly”

CONSONANCE

Much like [alliteration](#), [consonance](#) creates music and contributes to the poem’s meaning.

For instance, in the second stanza, consonant /l/ sounds connect “fling,” “whirl,” and “[t]ill.” This consonance helps to emphasize the fact that the speaker is dancing, and “fling[ing]” his arms open until (“till”) the “white day” is over. Then, later in the stanza, /l/ sounds appear again, linking “pale,” “tall,” and “slim,” and then “tenderly,” “Black” and “like.” Here, the consonant soft /l/ sounds communicate the comfort and relief the speaker finds with the arrival of evening. These repeated soft sounds, which contrast with the hard /t/ and /d/ sounds of “white day,” also convey the “gentle[ness]” and “tender[ness]” of the arriving night.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “fling”
- **Line 2:** “place”
- **Line 3:** “whirl”
- **Line 4:** “Till”
- **Line 6:** “tall,” “tree”
- **Line 7:** “night,” “gently”
- **Line 8:** “Dark”

- **Line 9:** “dream”
- **Line 10:** “fling”
- **Line 11:** “face”
- **Line 13:** “Till”
- **Line 14:** “pale”
- **Line 15:** “tall,” “slim”
- **Line 16:** “tenderly”
- **Line 17:** “Black,” “like”

ASSONANCE

The poem uses [assonance](#) to connect words together and to create layers of meaning. For example, long /a/ sounds connect “place” and “day” in the first stanza. These long /a/ sounds reappear in the second stanza, with the pairing of “face” and “day.” This assonance calls attention to what shifts in the speaker’s second variation on his dream. In the second iteration, the speaker doesn’t just long for “some place” where he can open his arms wide. He envisions doing this in “the face” of the sun—and implicitly, in the “face” of the white day and white society as a whole. The poem’s assonance, then, calls attention to the subtle change in the poem’s [tone](#), as it shifts from longing to defiance and resistance.

The poem also uses sequences of assonant long /e/ sounds at the endings of both stanzas. These long /e/ sounds appear in “evening,” “tree,” “me,” and “dream” in stanza one, and then in “evening,” “tree,” and “me” in stanza two. These assonant line endings create an effect *close* to rhyme, even though only “tree” and “me” are full or exact rhymes in both cases. In each of these moments of the poem, though, the long vowel sounds create a sense of pause and continuity, conveying the speaker’s peace as evening rolls in.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** “place”
- **Line 4:** “day”
- **Line 5:** “evening”
- **Line 6:** “tree”
- **Line 8:** “me”
- **Line 9:** “dream”
- **Line 11:** “face”
- **Line 13:** “day”
- **Line 14:** “evening”
- **Line 15:** “tree”
- **Line 17:** “me”



VOCABULARY

Variations () - A slightly different version of something. The poem’s title, then, means that the speaker will describe two different versions of his dream.

Fling (Line 1, Line 10) - To energetically throw something. In the poem, the speaker means that he throws open his arms.

Whirl (Line 3, Line 12) - To spin around quickly.

Pale (Line 14) - Light-colored, the opposite of dark.



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Dream Variations" doesn't follow a traditional form, but its shape is still important to its meaning. First, the poem is written in two stanzas. These stanzas correspond to the "variations" of the speaker's dream: in each stanza, the speaker recounts his dream in a slightly different way.

Within each stanza, the lines are grouped into rhyming [quatrain](#)s. But the first stanza ends with an additional line ("That is my dream!").

This shape helps the poem build toward its meaning and ending. Where the first stanza ends with the speaker's cry that everything that he has just described is his "dream," the second stanza ends *without* this extra line. The poem ends simply by describing the arrival of a night that is "Black" like the speaker, suggesting that the speaker has made his dream a reality through the poem itself.

The poem also plays with forms taken from the Black musical traditions of jazz and the blues. Both of these genres of music work by introducing themes and patterns, and then swerving away from these patterns to create new variations. In the "variations" of its two stanzas, the poem does something similar with its rhythms, language, and sounds: for instance, "To whirl and to dance" in line 3 transforms into an exuberant "Dance! Whirl! Whirl!" in line 12. These jazzy riffs on a theme reflect the speaker's visions of creativity, belonging, and shared identity in the Black community.

METER

"Dream Variations" is mostly written in dimeter, or lines with two metrical feet. For example, the first two lines read:

To **fling** | my arms **wide**
In some **place** | of the **sun**

In the first line, "To fling" is an [iamb](#): a metrical foot that goes da-DUM. Then, "my arms wide" is an [anapest](#), which goes da-da-DUM. The second line is made out of two anapests ("In some place" and "of the sun"). In spite of these different kinds of feet, the lines sound rhythmic and balanced because each uses two stressed syllables. The movement between iambs and anapests feels a lot like the "dance" the speaker describes. A lot of the lines in the poem work this way, moving back and forth between iambic and anapestic dimeter.

There are also a couple of moments in the second stanza when the meter uses three stressed syllables in a row, like "Dance! Whirl! Whirl!" or "A tall, slim tree." That break from the pattern of two stresses per line gives these "variations" a little extra energy.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem's [rhyme scheme](#) shifts to reflect its meaning. The first four lines of the poem ("To fling [...] is done") begin with a steady pattern, which goes like this:

ABCB

This pattern sets up the expectation that the second half of the stanza will follow a similar back-and-forth rhyme scheme. Instead, though, the last five lines of the stanza go like this:

DEFEG

While there are only two true rhymes here ("tree" and "me"), all the ending words here are connected to each other through [assonant](#) long /e/ sounds: "evening," "tree," "gently," "me," and "dream." This sequence of long vowel sounds at the end of the stanza creates a sense of lengthening, rest, and pause, matching the speaker's description of his delicious relaxation "at cool evening."

The poem's second stanza works in a similar way, and even uses many of the same rhyme words as the first stanza, building to the same gentle concluding rhyme on the words "tree" and "me." In both of these "Dream Variations," rhyme helps the speaker come to a gentle rest, at ease and "rhyming" with his surroundings.



SPEAKER

The speaker of "Dream Variations" remains unnamed, but the reader still learns a lot about him. The speaker is Black and dreams of being free of the strictures and segregation of an oppressive society—of living a life of freedom and self-expression.

Importantly, too, the speaker is an artist: in his "dream," he imagines getting through the "white day" by dancing. This exuberant art form brings the speaker, ultimately, to the peaceful night and the Black community that it represents.

All of these qualities make it possible to read the speaker as Langston Hughes himself. A leader in the Harlem Renaissance—a Black art movement that emerged from New York City in the early 20th century—Hughes was a poet, novelist, and playwright who explored the Black American experience.

The Harlem Renaissance championed a distinctly Black art, free from the dominant white aesthetic in American culture. Similarly, the speaker of "Dream Variations" dreams of finding relief, comfort, and shared identity within the Black

community—and among Black artists.

That said, because the poem leaves the speaker's identity open-ended, he can also be read as an everyperson, whose "dream" is the dream of many Black Americans: a vision of freedom, belonging, and safety, free of white oppression.



SETTING

The setting of "Dream Variations" is the speaker's dream. The speaker imagines finding a place in "the sun" where he can open his arms wide in a gesture of freedom. He imagines dancing in the sunlight until the "white day" is over and then resting underneath a "tall tree" in the evening. Finally, the night arrives, and it is "Dark" and "Black" as he is, offering the speaker comfort and relief.

All of these details create a peaceful outdoor setting in which the speaker can express himself freely. In nature, the poem suggests, the social constructs of racism and segregation don't exist. At the same time, this *imagined* beautiful, natural setting suggests *another* setting: the oppressive reality in which the speaker currently lives, from which he dreams of this other world. Although this setting isn't described within the poem, it is implicitly present, the oppressive backdrop against which this dream of freedom comes into relief.

Finally, the "night" in the poem is a setting in its own right. Since the night is "Black," it can be read as representing the Black community, in which the speaker finds comfort, relief, and a sense of shared identity and vision.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"Dream Variations" was originally published in Langston Hughes's first poetry collection, *The Weary Blues*, which came out in 1926. This collection explores aspects of Black American experience and draws on the traditionally Black musical traditions of jazz and the blues. In fact, Hughes was known for writing what is now called "jazz poetry," playing on these genres' rhythm and music. He even envisioned the poems being performed to music in Harlem jazz clubs.

"Dream Variations" and *The Weary Blues* came out of the Harlem Renaissance, an early-20th-century Black art movement that flourished in the New York City neighborhood of Harlem. Hughes was a Harlem Renaissance leader; in his 1926 essay, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," he outlined the need for Black artists and writers to embrace Black life and culture in their work, instead of aspiring to a white aesthetic. "Dream Variations" reflects this vision, as the speaker imagines finding rest, comfort, and shared identity in the Black community.

Ideas Hughes worked with in "Dream Variations" also appear in his later work. For example, his 1951 collection *Montage of a Dream Deferred* uses dreams as an image for Black Americans' collective hopes for freedom and equality.

The Weary Blues, including "Dream Variations," had a profound effect on American literature, as other Black writers explored Hughes's jazz and blues aesthetic and embraced a distinctly Black poetics. The last line of the poem ("Black like me") also provided a title for a famous nonfiction work of the same name by American journalist John Howard Griffin. Griffin, who was white, deliberately darkened his skin to be perceived as Black and traveled through the segregated American South. He documented the hatred and violence he experienced in [Black Like Me](#), which was published in 1961.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In the early 20th century, millions of Black Americans migrated from the South to cities in the North, Midwest, and West, seeking a better life—a movement known as the Great Migration. These migrant populations faced pervasive discrimination and segregation, and a combination of state-sanctioned racism and violence pushed them into poorer neighborhoods. Harlem, in New York City, was one such neighborhood.

In the 1910s and 1920s, Black artists, writers, and musicians who had migrated to Harlem created what is now known as the Harlem Renaissance: an outpouring of art, music, and literature that explored Black Americans' experience and forged a distinctly Black aesthetic. Defying the harsh conditions they lived in, these artists expressed a vision for a different future: not one of assimilation to white culture, but of embracing Black culture and creating art for a Black audience.

The poem "Dream Variations" expresses much of the hope and feeling of this movement. The speaker imagines surviving the "white day"—the dominant white society—through his art. In the last line of the poem, he embraces his identity through a night that is "Black like [him]," suggesting that he finds relief, safety, and autonomy in a shared Black identity—just what the artists of the Harlem Renaissance aspired to.



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [The Jazz Aesthetic](#) — Read about the jazz aesthetic that Hughes pioneered: a form of poetry that draws on the musical traditions of jazz and the blues. (<https://poets.org/text/brief-guide-jazz-poetry>)
- [Smithsonian Article on Black Like Me](#) — Learn about Black Like Me, the 1961 nonfiction work by John Howard Griffin that takes its title from the last line of "Dream Variations." In the book, Griffin, who was white, documents his

experiences traveling through the segregated American South while passing as Black.

(<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/black-like-me-50-years-later-74543463/>)

- [A Biography of Langston Hughes](#) — Learn about Langston Hughes's life and work in this biographical article from the Poetry Foundation. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/langston-hughes>)
- [The Weary Blues](#) — Learn more about The Weary Blues, the 1926 collection that included "Dream Variations," in this essay by contemporary American poet Kevin Young. (<https://poets.org/text/langston-hughess-weary-blues>)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER LANGSTON HUGHES POEMS

- [Cross](#)
- [Daybreak in Alabama](#)
- [Democracy](#)
- [Dreams](#)
- [Harlem](#)

- [I, Too](#)
- [Let America Be America Again](#)
- [Mother to Son](#)
- [Night Funeral in Harlem](#)
- [The Ballad of the Landlord](#)
- [Theme for English B](#)
- [The Negro Speaks of Rivers](#)
- [The Weary Blues](#)



HOW TO CITE

MLA

Little, Margaree. "Dream Variations." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 12 Jun 2020. Web. 4 Jan 2022.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Little, Margaree. "Dream Variations." LitCharts LLC, June 12, 2020. Retrieved January 4, 2022. <https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/langston-hughes/dream-variations>.