

Dreams



SUMMARY

The speaker urges the reader to hold on tightly to dreams, comparing the pain of life without dreams to the ordeal of an injured bird that can't get off the ground.

The speaker again urges the reader to hold on tightly to dreams, this time comparing the bleakness of life without dreams to the emptiness of a frozen winter landscape.



THEMES



THE NECESSITY OF DREAMS

"Dreams" is one of Langston Hughes's many poems about the power and necessity of dreams for both individuals and communities. In eight short lines, the poem's speaker warns the reader that abandoning dreams (which might mean hopes, aspirations, fantasies, imaginative visions, and/or illusions) robs life of its vitality and purpose. Through its [metaphorical images](#) of brokenness and barrenness, the poem depicts life without dreams as no longer worth living.

The speaker begins by advising the reader to hold on to dreams, illustrating the pain of a life without them by comparing it to an injured, earthbound bird. "[A] broken-winged bird / That cannot fly" is a suffering creature that has lost its mobility, as well as one of its defining traits (that is, the power of flight). It may also have lost its bearings, community, and means of obtaining food. The comparison thus implies that a life without dreams is painful, frustrating, deprived, and possibly unable to continue much longer. This comparison also suggests that dreams are a defining trait of humanity, something that drives and sustains people.

The speaker then repeats—in even more ominous terms—the advice to hold on to dreams, this time comparing a dreamless life to a lifeless field. Unlike an injured bird, which is alive and might recover, "a barren field / Frozen with snow" can't sustain any life at all. This comparison indicates that giving up one's dreams can be more than a painful crisis: it can feel like emotional or spiritual death.

The speaker never explicitly defines "dreams" in the poem, and the poem's meaning here changes slightly depending on how readers interpret the word. If readers take "dreams" to mean *hopes* or *aspirations*, then the metaphor of life as a "barren field" evokes people's inability to imagine a rewarding future (or any future, for that matter) when they lose sight of their dreams. If "dreams" means *fantasies* or *illusions*, then the metaphor suggests that life is harsh, cold, and empty when seen as it

really is—that is, without the veil of "dreams" over it. By extension, the metaphor implies that the dreams people *do* have preserve, nourish, and enrich them, like crops from a fertile field.

Despite the speaker's call for people to cling to dreams, the shift from "if dreams die" in the first stanza to "when dreams go" in the second indicates that nothing can keep dreams alive forever; losing them is a matter of "when," not "if." The poem's abrupt, sobering ending—"frozen" image, mirroring the stasis that accompanies the end of dreams and the end of life—underscores the urgency of "Hold[ing] fast to dreams" as long as possible.

Dreams are a subject that Hughes returned to over and over in his poetry. He often linked them with the experiences of Black Americans and/or the adjective "deferred" (postponed, delayed). But "Dreams" is a broad, stark statement: an unqualified warning to hold on to dreams in general, whether or not they ever come true. Their loss brings pain, incapacity, and emptiness; therefore, the poem argues, they are a vital source of pleasure, strength, and sustenance.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-8



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

*Hold fast to...
... if dreams die*

Lines 1-2 of "Dreams" consist of an imperative (instruction or command) followed by the beginning of an explanation. In other words, the poem's speaker is offering and justifying a piece of advice.

Who is the speaker, and whom are they addressing? The speaker's authoritative tone suggests that their experience has provided some insight on the subject of dreams. The lack of other identifying context (either in the title or the poem) suggests that the speaker is more or less equivalent to the poet and that their advice is addressed to readers in general.

What kind of "dreams" does line 1 refer to? The word could literally mean visions experienced during sleep. More broadly, it could mean hopes, aspirations, imaginative escapes from reality (as in daydreams), artistic visions, fantasies, illusions, or some combination of these. The context points toward the second category of dreams, since it makes more sense to remain attached to meaningful hopes than to semi-random nocturnal

visions!

The word "fast" (line 1) contains a potential double meaning. In context, it primarily means *tightly* or *securely*. "Hold fast" is another way of saying, "Hold on tight." But another definition of "fast"—*quickly*—may be relevant, too. Line 2 indicates that dreams can "die," so the speaker may be warning the reader to grab hold of dreams both *securely* and *quickly*, before they slip away (or before they're taken away by some outside force). How this advice translates to real life is open to interpretation, but the general sense is clear: the speaker wants readers to take their dreams as seriously as possible, as soon as possible.

The sound of these lines underscores their urgency. They're terse and full of punchy monosyllabic words. The poem's basic [meter](#) is [iambic](#) dimeter (meaning each line has two iambs, poetic feet with an unstressed-stressed beat pattern). As such, lines 1-2 contain at least four strong stresses:

Hold **fast** to **dreams**
For **if** dreams **die**

However, Hughes often employed metrical substitutions and variations. (As a poet who helped incorporate jazz techniques into modern poetry, he liked to keep his verse rhythms a little unpredictable.) Lines 1-2 could also be scanned as follows:

Hold **fast** to **dreams**
For **if** **dreams** **die**

In other words, Hughes may want the reader to hear [spondees](#) (stressed syllable + stressed syllable) rather than iambs (unstressed + stressed) at the beginning of the first line and the end of the second.

Regardless of the exact pattern, these strongly stressed monosyllables make the lines sound emphatic. [Alliteration](#) reinforces the emphasis as well: "dreams"/"dreams"/"die."

LINES 3-4

*Life is a ...
... That cannot fly.*

Lines 3-4 complete the speaker's explanation: "if dreams die," the speaker says, then misery follows.

The speaker specifically compares life without dreams to "a broken-winged bird / That cannot fly," a simple but evocative [metaphor](#) that suggests many parallels between the two situations. A broken-winged bird has lost (at least temporarily) its usual mobility, as well as one of its defining characteristics: the power of flight.

Moreover, since birds depend on flight for foraging, migration, predator evasion, and more, a wild bird that breaks a wing is in severe danger. It may not be able to find food, rejoin its flock, or protect itself. It is likely to die early, as most such injuries can't

heal without human intervention (and sometimes not even then; even a bird lucky enough to be healed by a human will be grounded for some time).

The comparison thus indicates that the loss of dreams makes life difficult, dangerous, and possibly even doomed. People who have given up their dreams, or had their dreams taken away, may feel stalled and immobilized. They may feel they've lost an essential part of their identity. They may struggle to sustain themselves, find community with others, protect themselves from harm, and, ultimately, survive. A life without dreams, the speaker says, is a life in crisis or despair.

Formally, these lines echo the situation they're describing. Whereas lines 1, 2, and 4 follow the basic pattern of [iambic dimeter](#) (with small variations), Line 3 follows a very different pattern:

Life is a broken-winged bird

This line is longer (seven syllables, not four) and clearly doesn't follow the da-DUM pattern of iambic meter. These variations disrupt what is otherwise, metrically, a fairly smooth [quatrain](#). It's as if the verse stumbles on the way to completing the rhyme—much as a broken-winged bird, or a despairing person, might stumble. Meanwhile, [alliteration](#) ("broken"/"bird"), [assonance](#) ("die"/"life"/"fly"), and [rhyme](#) ("die"/"fly") place extra emphasis on several syllables, making the verse sound forceful and urgent.

Finally, there's a positive flip side to this somber metaphor: if life without dreams brings stasis, suffering, and/or despair, life *with* dreams can bring progress, pleasure, and hope. A life full of dreams is like a bird that *can* fly.

LINES 5-6

*Hold fast to ...
... when dreams go*

The second stanza begins in the same way as the first: "Hold fast to dreams." The [repetition](#) of this advice further highlights its urgency. The speaker believes it's important enough to tell the reader twice, even in the context of a very short poem.

Line 6 also almost repeats line 2 from the first stanza, but with two important changes. Rather than "For **if** dreams **die**," the speaker now says, "For **when** dreams **go**." This time, there's a sense of inevitability about the loss of dreams: it's a question of when, not if. Even if the reader follows the speaker's advice, dreams will expire at some point; the best anyone can do is hold on to them as long as possible.

Similarly, dreams may not die in a sudden and dramatic event (like the breaking of a bird's wing, which may end its hopes of survival), but they will ultimately go, even if the departure is gradual (like the onset of winter evoked in the final lines).

Notice that the non-[alliterative](#) phrase "dreams go" doesn't

sound quite as harsh and emphatic as the alliterative "dreams die." The softening of consonant sounds mirrors the difference in intensity between the two verbs, *die* and *go*.

LINES 7-8

*Life is a ...
... Frozen with snow.*

Lines 7-8 conclude the second stanza and the poem. They mirror the arrangement of words (the syntax) but revise the [metaphor](#) of lines 3-4, which concluded the first stanza. The many symmetries between the two stanzas (that is, their [parallelism](#)) make their differences stand out sharply.

This time, the speaker compares life without dreams not to "a broken-winged bird / That cannot fly" but to "a barren field / Frozen with snow." Whereas the bird still has some chance of recovery despite being in pain and danger, the field is completely dead. In fact, it's dead twice over, because it's both "barren" (its soil can't produce crops) and "frozen" (with snow that would smother anything it produced).

The most optimistic interpretation of this metaphor is that even a barren, frozen field *might* be made fertile through human intervention (soil treatment, etc.) once winter is over. But this would require far more time and effort than healing an injured bird. Short of this interpretation, the metaphor is very bleak: it implies that when dreams are gone, life is over.

However, like the previous metaphor, this one has a positive flip side. It implies that a life *with* dreams is like a fertile field during warmer seasons: healthy, productive, nourishing, and so on. As emphasized by the repetition in lines 1 and 5, the speaker's primary aim is not discouraging readers but *encouraging* them to embrace their dreams.

As in earlier lines, the sonic devices of [rhyme](#) ("go"/"snow"), [alliteration](#) ("field"/"frozen"), and [assonance](#) ("frozen"/"snow") help link and emphasize important words. Additionally, [consonance](#) links the adjectives "barren" and "frozen," and the consonant sounds in the phrase "barren field" subtly echo those of "broken-winged bird."

As in line 3, the syllable count and [meter](#) change in line 7, emphasizing the disruption caused by the loss of dreams. Both lines open with a [trochee](#) (stressed-unstressed) before returning to [iamb](#)s:

Life is a barren field
Frozen with snow.

It's also possible to read "field" as an unstressed or half-stressed syllable. Regardless, these lines, while metrically disruptive, flow more smoothly than lines 3-4. It's fitting that lines about snow-covered emptiness would be smoother than lines about brokenness. In both cases, the sound complements the image.

Finally, while it's not as loose as [free verse](#), "Dreams" packs so many metrical variations into a short space that its meter is hard to pin down. Iambic dimeter is the closest fit, but the poem never fully "settles into it"—appropriate for a work of art that's meant to unsettle.



SYMBOLS



THE BROKEN-WINGED BIRD

Birds and bird flight are common [symbols](#) of freedom, escape, possibility, joy, and success. Idioms like "free as a bird," "flew the coop," "spread your wings," and "soaring triumph" draw on this symbolism, which associates birds' liftoff from earth with humans' departure from a confined or mundane state into something "higher" or better. Likewise, the earthbound bird is a common symbol of *restricted* freedom. The idiom "clip [someone]'s wings," based on the practice of cutting birds' wing-feathers to prevent them from flying, means to curtail someone's freedom or potential. In his poem "[Sympathy](#)," Paul Laurence Dunbar's image of the "caged bird" symbolizes the individual trapped by society's conventions, particularly the Black individual trapped by American racism. (This poem was a likely influence on "Dreams": see the Context section.)

Hughes's version of this symbol, the "broken-winged bird" in "Dreams," emphasizes incapacity, vulnerability, and damaged potential. The physically wounded creature evokes the psychological wound of living without dreams. The fact that the bird "cannot fly" implies that life without dreams can no longer fulfill its potential or take off toward success.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "a broken-winged bird / That cannot fly."



THE FROZEN FIELD

Fields are [symbolically](#) associated with growth, cultivation, sustenance, and possibility (as in an "open field" of choices or opportunities). Idioms such as "my [professional] field," "tough row to hoe," and "harvest the fruits of your labor" link fields with a life's work, successes, and failures.

The field in "Dreams" is both "barren" and "frozen." It represents a life without any potential for growth—a life that might as well be over, if it isn't already. (Fields can no longer be cultivated in winter, and barren fields can't be cultivated at all. Winter itself is traditionally associated with age and decline, just as spring is associated with youth and fertility.)

A field that contains nothing but snow is likely to be relatively

flat and smooth. The visual flatness of the image evokes the flatness, or dullness, of a life without dreams. Similarly, the frozenness of the field suggests that life without dreams is numbing, bitter, and harsh.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-8:** "a barren field / Frozen with snow."



POETIC DEVICES

METAPHOR

"Dreams" revolves around two major [metaphors](#). The speaker compares life after the loss of dreams to "a broken-winged bird / That cannot fly" and "a barren field / Frozen with snow." The first metaphor is bleak and the second even more so. The first implies that life without dreams is painful, lonely, dangerous, and so on. The second implies that it's sterile, numbing, and empty—a deathlike state.

As discussed in the Symbols section of this guide, these metaphors are enriched by [symbolic](#) associations that don't explicitly feature in the poem. For example, flying birds are often associated with freedom and grounded birds with the loss of freedom. Although the theme of freedom isn't explicit in "Dreams," this association broadens the poem's range of possible meanings.

Subtler metaphorical language appears in the phrase "Hold fast" and in the verbs "die" and "go." This phrasing implicitly compares dreams to elusive living things that will soon die (naturally or due to some outside force) or leave (because they've escaped or because they've been snatched away) unless the dreamer clings tightly to them. In other words, dreams are like forms of endangered life, and life without them is endangered in turn.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Line 2
- Lines 3-4
- Line 5
- Line 6
- Lines 7-8

ALLITERATION

"Dreams" contains several instances of [alliteration](#), including "dreams die," "broken-winged bird," and "field / Frozen." The alliteration in these phrases links the noun closely with a verb or adjective, strengthening the reader's association of *dreams* with *dying*, *brokenness* with the [metaphorical](#) *bird*, and *frozenness* with the metaphorical *field*.

Although they occur too far apart to qualify as alliteration, the initial (and final) consonant sounds shared by "broken" and "barren" link these adjectives and noun phrases in a similar way. This link makes sense, because they occur in the same position in their respective lines/stanzas and anchor the metaphor in each; in other words, the shared sounds draw attention to the poem's [parallelism](#).

Alliteration also tends to add a little extra emphasis to syllables. "Dreams" is already a very short poem containing very short lines, a high proportion of monosyllabic words, and a high proportion of stressed syllables. All of these features tend to make poetry sound more urgent and emphatic; here, combined with alliteration, they contribute to the poem's heavy, almost percussive sound. This sound fits the poem's rhetorical context, as the speaker is offering urgent, emphatic advice.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "dreams die"
- **Line 3:** "broken," "bird"
- **Lines 7-8:** "field / Frozen"

ASSONANCE

"Dreams" contains several examples of [assonance](#), including "die"/"Life" and "Life"/"fly" in the first stanza and "go"/"Frozen" and "Frozen"/"snow" in the second. (The pairings of "die"/"fly" and "go"/"snow" are examples of [perfect rhyme](#), not strict assonance, although both devices involve shared vowel sounds.)

Like [alliteration](#), assonance can draw (or emphasize) thematic connections between the words it links. *Life* and *dying* are near-opposites, but they also have a close, inevitable relationship to one another. The poem's metaphors imply that when dreams *die*, *life* is thrown into crisis, and literal *dying* may begin. Meanwhile, *flying*—as in succeeding or getting aspirations "off the ground"—sustains *life*. Being *frozen* is characteristic of *snow*, and it is also (according to the poem) what [metaphorically](#) results from dreams *going* away. Assonance helps us "hear" all these relationships more clearly.

Finally, assonance can add a bit of emphasis to the syllables it links, although this effect is usually subtler than with alliteration. The reader may not even consciously detect it on a first reading or hearing, but it adds to the poem's overall rhetorical impact. In "Dreams," assonance (like alliteration) contributes to the emphatic, urgent, almost percussive sound of the verse. This sound fits the context, as the poem's speaker is offering urgent advice.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "die / Life"
- **Line 4:** "fly."

- **Line 6:** "go"
- **Line 8:** "Frozen," "snow."

REPETITION

"Dreams" not only *uses* [repetition](#), it's *built* on it. The most obvious repetition in the poem is its [anaphora](#): the phrase "Hold fast to dreams" begins both stanzas. This line also contains the main message of the poem—that it's vital to cling tightly to dreams. Anaphora helps drive that message home and lodge it in the reader's memory. It indicates that the message is so important as to be worth saying twice in an eight-line poem.

Anaphora is also part of the poem's broader use of [parallelism](#). The poem consists of two one-sentence stanzas of identical length, down to the total word count and the number of words in each line. The stanzas/sentences are identically structured and contain 9 identical words out of 16 total:

Hold fast to dreams
For [...] dreams [...]
Life is a [...]

All this parallelism highlights the urgency of the poem's advice and helps lodge it in the reader's memory. It also makes the variations in lines 6-8 stand out sharply, drawing attention to subtle differences in meaning between "if dreams **die**" and "**when** dreams **go**," as well as and between the two [metaphors](#) for life without dreams.

In the first stanza, the speaker suggests that it's possible to stop dreams from disappearing; that conditional "if" offers a glimmer of hope that dreams don't have to "die." In the second stanza, the speaker is more declarative: it's not longer a question of "if" dreams will die, but of "when" they will "go." The parallelism of the stanzas makes this subtle change stand out more clearly for the reader.

The parallelism of the poem's metaphors does a similar thing. On the one hand, all this repetition adds to the poem's insistent, urgent tone; the speaker wants to make sure that the reader gets the message. But on the other hand, this parallelism again points readers to the *differences* between the metaphors here. The first is a bit more hopeful; perhaps the bird's wing can be repaired and allow the animal to fly again. A barren field, however, is one incapable of producing life, of growing new crops. The speaker has thus raised the poem's stakes, making the call to hold on to dreams feel all the more urgent and imperative.

Each stanza also contains one internal repetition of the word "dreams." In each case, "dreams" occurs twice in short succession, with just two other words in between. This device is called [diacope](#). "Dreams," of course, is also the poem's title. This device not only emphasizes Hughes's subject, but also ties form

to content: the poem repeatedly mentions the thing it's urging the reader to hold in mind.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "Hold fast to dreams / For"
- **Line 2:** "dreams"
- **Line 3:** "Life is a"
- **Lines 5-6:** "Hold fast to dreams / For"
- **Line 6:** "dreams"
- **Line 7:** "Life is a"

ENJAMBMENT

"Dreams" consists of two sentences of three clauses each. Because the poem uses unconventional punctuation, it may *look* as though there's [enjambment](#) at the ends of the first two lines of each stanza (given that each of these lines ends without any punctuation at all). But in reality, the ends of lines 1, 2, 5, and 6 all coincide with the ends of clauses; there's an *implied* pause after "dreams," "die," "dreams," and "go." These lines are thus [end-stopped](#). The "missing" commas in lines 1-2 and 5-6 simply help create a visual sense of suspension and loss, reinforcing the poem's portrayal of life without dreams as deprived and desolate.

However, there is true enjambment at the end of line 3:

[...] a broken-winged bird
That cannot fly.

Enjambment breaks a clause across lines of verse, so it's a fitting device for the lines about the *broken-winged* bird. These two lines are also noticeably different in length—line 3 is the longest in the poem, and is slightly "too long" for the meter—giving them a lopsided quality that evokes the lopsidedness of a bird with a hurt wing.

Enjambment often heightens the emphasis on the first word after the line break. This is the case in line 8, where the word "**Frozen**," stressed on the first syllable, also gains emphasis by breaking the poem's metrical pattern:

[...] a barren field
Frozen with snow.

You can hear this additional emphasis by reading lines 7-8 aloud: notice how you're forced to stress the word "Frozen" harder than, say, "barren." Hughes follows traditional practice by capitalizing the beginnings of lines, so the enjambed word "Frozen" draws more visual attention as well. All of this emphasis helps drive home the chilling impact of the loss of dreams. It's as if the freeze falls hard and suddenly.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "bird / That"
- **Lines 7-8:** "field / Frozen"



VOCABULARY

Fast (Line 1, Line 5) - "Fast" can mean *tightly/securely*, or it can mean *quickly*. "Dreams" uses the word primarily in the first sense, urging the reader to hold on tightly to dreams. But it also contains a hint of the second meaning, as in, "Grab hold of dreams quickly, before it's too late."

Broken-winged (Line 3) - Having one or more injured wings. This nonstandard adjective (it's not found in most dictionaries) leaves some question as to the severity of the injury. Has Hughes's [metaphorical](#) bird lost its power of flight temporarily or permanently? (In other words: if dreams die, is life temporarily painful or permanently doomed?)

Barren (Line 7) - To be "barren" means that something is sterile, unable to grow or sustain life; or that it's empty, desolate. As with "broken-winged," there are possible degrees of severity here. Landscapes are sometimes described as "barren" when they're *mostly* empty, or contain *little* vegetation as opposed to none. But the combination of "barren" and "frozen" means this metaphorical field will be lifeless for a long time yet.

never follows this meter, or any meter, to the letter. It's *possible* to read Lines 1, 2, 5, and 6 as perfect iambic dimeter, but it's also possible to read any or all of these lines as containing variations (most often the substitution of a [spondee](#)—a pair of stressed syllables—for one of the iambs in the line).

Here is one possible way to scan lines 1-2, for example:

Hold **fast** | to **dreams**
For **if** | dreams **die**

But this can also be read as having spondees thrown in:

Hold **fast** | to **dreams**
For **if** | **dreams die**

Other lines are even less regular. Take lines 3 and 7-8, which can be read as follows:

Life is a | **broken-** | **winged** bird
[...]
Life is | a **bar-** | **ren** field
Frozen | with **snow**.

These lines start with [trochees](#) (stressed-unstressed) or [dactyls](#) (stressed-unstressed-unstressed, as in "Life is a"). Line 3 is very irregular and could be broken up in a few ways, perhaps evoking the stumbling of this "broken-winged bird." Lines 7-8 eventually fall back into iambs, but again start with a forceful stress.

So what's the case for "Dreams" being an iambic dimeter poem? Lines 1, 2, 4, 5, and 6 all contain four syllables with definite stresses on the second and fourth syllables. Regardless of all the other variations, this is enough to establish an *approximate* pattern of iambic dimeter. However, it could also be argued that "Dreams" never really settles into a consistent meter at all.

There are many ways to read these metrical effects into the poem's themes. An "unsettled" meter is appropriate for an unsettling poem; a "broken" meter is appropriate to a poem that deals with brokenness; a "slippery" meter is appropriate to a poem about dreams slipping away.

RHYME SCHEME

The second line of each [quatrain](#) rhymes with the fourth. "Dreams" thus follows the [rhyme scheme](#):

ABCB

Technically speaking, line 5 repeats the "A" rhyme from line 1 ("dreams"), even as other rhyme sounds are different; readers might thus think of stanza 2 as:

ADED

However one maps it out, the important thing here is that the pattern of rhyme repeats in each stanza. The rhymes



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Dreams" consists of two [quatrains](#) (four-line stanzas). The combination of short quatrains and ABCB [rhyme scheme](#) are reminiscent of the [ballad](#) form. Many traditional ballads employ repetitive structures and themes of sorrow or loss, as "Dreams" does. But "Dreams" doesn't follow traditional ballad [meter](#), and it contains so many rhythmic variations that it barely follows *any* meter. In keeping with its theme of brokenness, it might be described as a "broken" ballad, with the repeated line "Hold fast to dreams" serving as a kind of [refrain](#). Ultimately, however, it doesn't adhere to any standard (named) form.

METER

The [meter](#) of "Dreams" is closest to [iambic](#) dimeter, meaning there are two iambs (feet with an unstressed-stressed syllable pattern) per line. A perfect line of iambic dimeter thus looks like this:

unstressed **stressed** | unstressed **stressed**

However, the poem contains so many metrical variations that it

themselves are also exact: "die"/"fly", "snow"/"go." Rhyme helps make verse memorable (and memorizable), so it's a natural device for a poem in which the speaker is advising the reader—and presumably hoping that advice will stick.

End rhyme (especially perfect end rhyme) can also lend verse a sense of completeness, as though one line is finishing what another started. This effect fits the context of the poem, which describes a process coming to a full and inevitable stop: when dreams go, the best of life is over.



SPEAKER

The speaker of "Dreams" is anonymous and addresses a general audience. It's fair to assume that this speaker closely approximates Langston Hughes himself, since the poem contains no ironies or other clues to suggest that the speaker's view of dreams differs significantly from the poet's.

The poem does offer one major clue about the speaker: it's a poem of *advice*, meaning that the speaker claims some authority on the subject of dreams. It's reasonable to infer that this speaker has some experience with dreams and/or the loss of dreams. The poem itself reveals nothing about the nature of this experience, whether it might be firsthand or secondhand, etc. However, because Hughes published many other poems on the subject of dreams (see Context), it's useful to read this speaker in the context of the poet's biography.

Hughes wrote "Dreams" as a Black American in his early 20s. Assuming it expresses his personal sentiments, it's a notably world-weary statement for a young author to make. Though it's delivered as universal life advice, it may also, like his subsequent poems about dreams (such as "[Dream Variations](#)" and "[Harlem](#)"), reflect his experience of a country that's historically been hostile to the dreams of its Black population.



SETTING

"Dreams" has no specific **setting**. Its only reference to place, "a barren field / Frozen with snow," is **metaphorical** and does not indicate that the poem is set in winter or in the countryside.

The lack of a particular setting underscores that this is a poem about "Life" in general, delivered by an anonymous speaker to a non-specific audience (or perhaps by the poet to readers at large).



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Langston Hughes was a leading writer of the Harlem Renaissance, an early-20th-century artistic, intellectual, and social movement centered in the largely Black Harlem

neighborhood of New York City. Hughes published "Dreams" in 1923, near the start of his career, as the movement was beginning to flourish. In addition, the Harlem Renaissance overlapped with and contributed to the literary Modernist movement, which began in the 1910s, gained momentum after World War I, and introduced a wave of poetic experimentation.

Hughes's poetry, including "Dreams," both influenced and was influenced by these movements, as well as by the broader social currents of the period. For example, the Harlem Renaissance brought an explosion of musical innovation, particularly in jazz and the blues. Hughes strove to adapt the techniques of these genres into his poetry. His first published collection was titled *The Weary Blues* and contains, in addition to the famous **title piece**, such poems as "Jazzonia," "The Cat and the Saxophone," and "Harlem Nightclub." (It also contains an entire section called "Dream Variations": proof that dreams were a central concern of his poetry from the start.)

Hughes helped establish the "jazz poetry," through effects ranging from playful typography to radical variations on traditional meter. Modernist poets (such as Hughes's contemporaries T. S. Eliot, E. E. Cummings, and Marianne Moore) also placed a high value on formal experimentation. The metrical idiosyncrasies of "Dreams" reflect Hughes's passion for innovative musical and verse technique.

"Dreams" is one of many dream-related poems Hughes wrote throughout his career, most notably in his 1951 collection *Montage of a Dream Deferred*. A famous example is "[Harlem](#)," which begins, "What happens to a dream deferred? // Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?" and ends, "*Or does it explode?*" Both poems concern the fate of dreams, but whereas "Dreams" emphasizes how thwarted dreams can cause internal suffering, "Harlem" hints that they may also cause external rage or violence.

Hughes's "Dreams" may also have drawn inspiration from Paul Laurence Dunbar's classic poem "[Sympathy](#)" (1899), in which a "caged bird" **symbolizes**, in part, the author's plight as a Black American confined by prejudice. Maya Angelou later **alluded** to this poem in the title of her autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Writing a generation after Dunbar, Hughes would have been familiar with "Sympathy" and may have adapted its central symbol in writing "Dreams."

Like Dunbar's work, Hughes's poetry on this theme is closely associated with the dreams and realities of Black Americans in particular, as well as the problem of the "American Dream." It profoundly influenced many marginalized writers during and after his lifetime, among them playwright Lorraine Hansberry (*A Raisin in the Sun*) and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (some of whose speeches **drew on** phrases and ideas in Hughes's work).

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Both the Harlem Renaissance and Modernism channeled the

social conflicts of the age. With daring candor, Hughes and other Black artists of the Harlem Renaissance expressed the frustration, anger, and sorrow of life in a racist society. At the time "Dreams" was published, the southern U.S. was still segregated, the Ku Klux Klan was resurgent, and the Civil Rights movement was decades away. (Also far on the horizon was the modern LGBTQ rights movement, and many scholars believe Hughes was a gay man who chose not to risk openness about his sexuality.)

Though "Dreams" doesn't explicitly address injustice or oppression, it's part of a larger body of work, including Hughes's other dream poems, that confronts these themes repeatedly. Its attitude toward dreams reflects the experience of a writer whose country often belittled, blocked, or crushed the dreams of people like himself.

During the 1920s, Modernist poetry was also wrestling with the catastrophes of the previous decade, especially World War I and the 1918 flu pandemic. T. S. Eliot famously captured this traumatized cultural landscape in his Modernist poem [The Waste Land](#), published in 1922. Though "Dreams" isn't necessarily a response to *The Waste Land*, its vision of "a barren field / Frozen with snow"—a wasteland of lost dreams—has something in common with Eliot's metaphor for cultural desolation.

- [Jazz Poetry](#) — A brief guide to the innovative style that Hughes and other Harlem Renaissance writers developed in their work. (<https://poets.org/text/brief-guide-jazz-poetry>)
- ["How Langston Hughes's Dreams Inspired MLK's"](#) — Read about connections between Langston Hughes's poetry and Martin Luther King, Jr.'s oratory, including his 1963 "I Have a Dream" speech. (<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/how-langston-hughess-dreams-inspired-mlks-180961929/>)
- [The Harlem Renaissance](#) — Learn more about the cultural and artistic movement Hughes helped pioneer. (<https://www.britannica.com/event/Harlem-Renaissance-American-literature-and-art>)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER LANGSTON HUGHES POEMS

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



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [The Poem Out Loud](#) — Watch Dr. Christopher Emdin of Columbia University read "Dreams" aloud and explain what the poem means to him as an educator. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fpFMTbpkv6s>)
- ["Dream Variations" at the Academy of American Poets](#) — Read another famous Hughes poem about dreams, one that engages with racial divisions and describes the speaker's own liberating dream. (<https://poets.org/poem/dream-variations>)



HOW TO CITE

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