Crushed Dreams and Reckless Life Styles:

“Harlem” & “We Real Cool”

“Harlem” by Langston Hughes is a poem that can really relate to the lives of many people. The poem is about dreams being forgotten and hopes being trampled if they are not your top priority. We’ve all had dreams that have been crushed, and we’ve all had a hope or two squished every now and again. Maybe it was due to not having enough time to follow your dream, or maybe you just gave up too easily. What happens when you have one too many of your dreams and hopes forgotten though? In the poem “We Real Cool” by Gwendolyn Brooks, the author interprets her outlook on a group of teenagers that have let their dream shrivel up and die. The boys have forgotten what is important to them and begin to live a careless life style. “We Real Cool” shows the boys spiraling downward and “Harlem” shows what happens when you have left you ambitions behind.

“What happens to a dream deferred? / Does it dry up/ Like a raisin in the sun?”(Hughes ll. 1-3). “We Real Cool” tells a story of a group of mislead teenage boys that have, more than likely, let their dreams slip away from them. In the poem, the boys dropped out of school at an early age, probably high school or maybe even middle school. This was probably due to getting grades that were less than average, and instead of trying to do something about their grades they took the easy way out and just gave up. They could have given up because they felt they were not good enough to be in school, and they would never make something of themselves. In
actuality, nothing can truly stop you from pursuing your dreams and making them a reality. The boys are forgetting their dreams of getting an education, graduating and making a life for themselves. They are letting their dreams dry up and wither away, just how “Harlem” reflects. If you don’t pay attention to your dreams, and make something of them, they will become lost and forgotten in the past. “Harlem” expresses this fact, and “We Real Cool” shows a real life example of what can happen when you don’t pursue your dreams.

Sometimes forgotten dreams can degenerate into something worse than just lost ambitions. In “Harlem”, Hughes ask does a dream, “…fester like a sore-/And then run?” (Hughes ll. 4-5). Hughes is referring to a person letting their hopes not only fade away, but then they partake in even worse behaviors. In “We Real Cool”, Brooks writes about how the boys stay out late drinking and partying. The boys not only dropped out of school, but they start to spend their nights drinking and listening to jazz music. It seems that their lives are slowly festering into something that will soon run over, and become something they will soon be un-able to control. In another line of Hughes’ poem he states, “Does it stink like rotten meat? /Or crust and sugar over/Like a syrupy sweet?” (Hughes ll. 6-8). Will the boys just give up and continue their ways, and turn everyone away from them like the stink of rotten meat? Or will they get their acts together and start planning for their futures like a healing wound? Will they heal or become infected with more bad behaviors and lost hopes? The way the poem, “We Real Cool” ends leaves it open for interpretation, but I feel that the boys are not going to recover completely. They seem to set in their ways of doing things, and are more than likely not willing to change and make a better life for themselves.

The last few stanzas in both poems could be represented as death. In “We Real Cool”, the boys are expected to die young due to a reckless life. This is more than likely caused by the
events that caused them loose hope in their selves. Which lead to their reckless partying, drinking, and ways of life. In “Harlem” the lines, “Maybe it just sags/Like a heavy load. /Or does it explode?”(Hughes ll. 9-11), can be thought of as an analogy for death. Death can either occur over time, as intended, until you are sagging and feel heavy. Or death can be quick, unexpected, and happen to you out of nowhere. I know this may sound farfetched to some. Loosing Ambition can lead to death? A little dramatic aren’t you? No actually, stress can be caused by losing hope and not know what to do with your life. Stress can then lead to more serious health problems, such as: Asthma, Heart complications, obesity diabetes and even depression (Griffin). These are all extremely serious health problems that can easily lead to death if not properly treated. This is where the boys in the poem, “We Real Cool”, are heading if they do not change their ways and plan for their futures. Unfortunately, they’re expected to die quickly and young, because of their irresponsible lifestyles and reckless ways of living.

Although the poems are written very differently, they both share a common theme when taking a deeper look into their meanings. If you lose hope in yourself and let your dreams fade away life will sneak up behind you when you least expect it and from then on your will be spiraling downward unless you take immediate actions. The poems also convey the message, never lose hope in yourself and always prepare for your future so that nothing will let you get behind in life. These poems both have very important meaning and a message that everyone should live by, that can easily be related to the lives of many people. This makes both of them wonderful works of literature that I would personally recommend to anyone that is suffering from lost ambitions or has taken a few wrong paths in life.
Works Cited

