‘What Happens to a Dream Deferred?’ Assignment

What happens to a dream deferred? Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?...Or does it Explode?
~ Langston Hughes

Read the following excerpt from Scott Challener and respond to the questions that follow.

Excerpt from Scott Challener’s article:
In “Harlem,” Langston Hughes asks one of American poetry’s most famous questions: what happens to a dream deferred? This question echoes throughout American culture, from Broadway to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s speeches. It would not be an exaggeration to say that every time the “American dream” is invoked, Hughes’s question is there, asking what that dream is, what conditions make it possible, and why for so many it seems little more than a trap, or an illusion, or a promise that no longer meaningfully obtains.

The composition and reception of “Harlem” suggest it is no accident that dreaming and deferral are so entwined in the civic discourse of the contemporary American moment.

Here is the entirety of “Harlem,” as it originally appeared in 1951:

What happens to a dream deferred?

   Does it dry up

   like a raisin in the sun?

   Or fester like a sore—

   And then run?

   Does it stink like rotten meat?

   Or crust and sugar over—

   like a syrupy sweet?

   Maybe it just sags

   like a heavy load.
Or does it explode?

If “Harlem” begins with a big question—“What happens to a dream deferred?”—the rest of the poem speculates on how best to answer that question. Hughes’s “answer” takes the form of five questions and one conjecture. These are urgent, embodied questions. Each directs attention to the material costs of neglect and provokes the senses in the process: the withering of the grape (rather than the lush, intoxicating poetry of wine); the uncared-for sore, an open wound now infected and oozing; the butchered meat fetid and putrefying; the candy, left out, abandoned, hardening into an inedible, oversweet, unshapely mass; the body bending, unfree, under a burden. Dreams here are not these overexposed things per se but are imagined to be like them and subject to the same forces—they are both visceral and vulnerable, and altogether too much. Dreams, like history, hurt. By implication, they demand care—and all the work that care entails.

After all these sensory experiences, the poem ends abruptly and dramatically in a way that demands consideration. One of the most ready-to-hand interpretations of that final line—“Or does it explode?”—is to think of the explosion as a riot, a reflection of the possibility that the oppressive conditions marginalized communities in Harlem and across Jim Crow America face might lead to open rebellion.

**Assignment:**
Respond to the following question: What happens to a dream deferred? Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?...Or does it Explode? You may think about the ‘dream’ in reference to ‘The American Dream’, your dreams, or both. How does this relate to the Black experience in America? What advice do you have to avoid dream deferral, overcome challenges, and make dreams come true? Explain your response based on what you know and what you have learned. Your response should be written in complete sentences, and be at least one paragraph in length.