Eugenia W. Collier: On "The Harlem Dancer"

Perhaps the poems which showed most effectively the tragic consequences of oppression, and which speak most eloquently in a universal language, are the poems which present quick portraits of black individuals. Here one sees a close-up of the laborer in Cullen's poem, who must toil incessantly only to have his golden fruit snatched by others. With great frequency the New Negro poets focused on the individual?often a black woman?and suggest the immense human potential behind the toil of the washer-woman, the strutting and wiggling of the prostitute, the swagger of the dandy, and so forth-human potential that has been destroyed by the social system. Among the best of these is McKay's "The Harlem Dancer."

In the slow, measured dignity of the sonnet form McKay has encased the wild and lascivious world of the Harlem night-club. As we study the poem in some depth, we see that this apparent paradox is actually quite appropriate.

Our first impression of the dancer is gained through a glimpse of her audience?young people, already caught up in the sordid life of the city. The men who applaud are mere youths; the prostitutes with them are also young. They applaud and laugh and watch the suggestive motions of the beautiful, half-revealed body. Yet the slow-moving rhythm of the poem implies a kind of sadness that contrasts with their gaiety. Focusing now upon the dancer herself, the poet compares her voice with the sound of a musical instrument?not with the wail of a saxaphone, nor the blatancy of brass, but with the softly delicate music of "blended flutes." In the next line the nightclub begins to fade out as the poet places the flutes on the lips of "black players on a picnic day." The outdoor wholesomeness of a picnic contrasts with the nightclub. The next two lines imbue the dancer with classic beauty and simplicity; her grace, her quiet loveliness, her garments draped loosely about her, could easily belong to Greek sculpture. But the poet compares her instead to a graceful palm tree, proudly swaying. In this comparison McKay suggests the pride in their African heritage which was widely expressed by the Harlem poets. The rest of the comparison, describing the palm as "lovelier for passing through a storm," suggests that the hardships of the dancer's experience have endowed her with a kind of beauty that she might not otherwise have attained.

Then abruptly the poet brings us back to the reality of the Harlem nightclub. The coins "tossed in praise" indicate that the world?and she herself?tragically underestimates her worth. She dances for mere coins, casually tossed by liquor-befogged youngsters. The poet reminds us that they, too, are victims, for although they are "wine-fused" and "bold-eyed," they are still only boys and girls. Perhaps their hunger and their eager passion may not be for sex alone, but actually for fulfillment of another sort. In the final couplet, the poet expresses the theme of the poem: that human values can be obscured by economic and social deprivation, but that they persist and are discernable to the compassionate observer.

Now the appropriateness of the sonnet form becomes apparent. Iambic pentameter is a slow, dignified meter, contemplative and often sad; and the theme of the poem is not lascivious dancing, but human dignity, not midnight gaiety but unobtrusive tragedy. The rhyme scheme
of the sonnet is demanding and restrictive; so also are the social and economic forces that have shaped the life of the Harlem dancer. There is, then, no conflict between form and theme.

In spite of occasional awkward juxtapositions of words, the poem attains a high level of artistry. The language is dynamic but restrained, the imagery is effective, the emotion is sincere and well-expressed. And although the characters and settings are Negro, the poem has universal application. In vividness it matches the quick, sympathetic portraits of Edwin Arlington Robinson. In social commentary it approaches Edwin Markham’s "The Man With the Hoe."