Nilay Gandhi: On "The Lynching"

"The Lynching" speaks to the cultural cancellation of the African-American race in the 1920s. Its form is a striking variation on the Italian sonnet. Much of the Italian sonnet's aesthetic appeal is its ability to go slowly, cruise the reader through a description and then a calm conclusion, in contrast to the quick abab rhymes and epiphany of the final couplet (gg) in a Shakespearean (or the variant Spenserian) sonnet. Accordingly, the octave in this poem follows the traditional Italian form, rhyming abbcddc. The concluding sestet breaks form, rhyming effegg. The embedded third quatrain makes the poem mimic a Shakespearean sonnet (three quatrains and a couplet). Because of this formal duality, it might be difficult to call "The Lynching" Italian or Shakespearean; the key is the poetic pace -- the reflective tone is more indicative of an Italian sonnet and so the poem can be primarily characterized as such. It largely follows the Italian rhyme scheme but has Shakespearean organization.

The Italian form rhetorically draws out both quatrains, forces the reader to mull over the event and not get caught up in verse. The octave's slow pace works well in describing the lynched man and his death. Line four, "The awful sin remained still unforgiven," is end-stopped with a period. Thus, we have the slight pause of the line's end together with the full stop, a longer caesura. This technique is repeated in the second quatrain, and in the third with a semicolon. These "hypercaesurae," caused by combining natural rhythmic breaks and punctuation, allow us to read the quatrains independently. The reader is forced to consider each quatrain for a moment, and then move on with the poem. We are made to read and evaluate simultaneously.

The first eight lines offer a description of the lynched man's general oneness with the night, Heaven, and his own culture. In line one we see him ascend to Heaven. In the second quatrain, the "bright and solitary star" (5) may represent the North star which slaves were told to follow when running away from their masters, "Perchance the one that ever guided him" (6). The use of "ever" would suggest a universal struggle for the African-American, positing this early 20th century lynching as a remnant of slavery itself. While this content offers an interesting notion of the separation between the blacks' heritage and whites' continuous present (always existing in the domination of a moment), it is all again intensified through form. The two-line space between the primary rhymes (aa and cc) adds pause to the hypercaesura, poignantly draws out each image, and heightens the despair.

The subject of the poem is hanged at night and related to the star that does not shine during the day. The relation between the man and night is emphasized at the poem's ninth line, the traditional turning point (volta) in an Italian sonnet. The sestet opens with "Day dawned" (9). The new day occurs simultaneously with the introduction of "the mixed crowds [that] came to view" (9). We have, therefore, a juxtaposition of the unnatural and the natural: death/night against life/day. Whereas the octave describes logistically unreal events of a spirit's ascension, the sestet focuses on the tangible and earthly. The speaker creates a disparaging oneness between the racist and the world. It is not only that these people are evil but that the world itself is evil. While the women's eyes in line 12 may very well be blue, the introduction of the day suggests an implicit parallel between the eyes and the color of the sky, between the racist and Nature. It is a hyperbole meant to demonstrate the power of the Lynchers, that they could even control the uncontrollable. The body is "ghastly" (10) and later it is a "dreadful
thing” (14). It loses any sense of human identification. Contrastingly, the crowds seem normal; the speaker offers no negative description through line 12. Lynching becomes not only accepted but natural.

This is why McKay breaks the Italian form. The added quatrain and lengthened pauses have us pensively consider the descriptions. The couplet is a way of saying nothing that preceded it makes sense. In describing the children as “fiendish” dancers (14), the lynchers are at last presented as wholly evil and so Nature and Fate (7) are evil. Through the dominance of a people, whites dominate the order of things. The redemption the man receives in the afterlife, a parallel drawn between the lynched and the Holy Spirit (1) and his dead father and God (2), combines with the rest of the poem to provide a political statement: the oppressor may own the world but the oppressed are the children of God. The final couplet negates the black race’s societal worth. The children are born with evil spirits, "lynchers that were to be" (13). Unlike McKay’s "The White City" which presents economic problems that can be fought, the link between the racist and the world in "The Lynching" demonstrates how ingrained racism is in the American society. It leaves no hope outside of the afterlife. Racism is the greatest of all troubles, as natural as the day; one so rooted in the culture that the blacks cannot overcome it. They are the hopeless.