

The Harlem Dancer



POEM TEXT

- 1 Applauding youths laughed with young prostitutes
- 2 And watched her perfect, half-clothed body sway;
- 3 Her voice was like the sound of blended flutes
- 4 Blown by black players upon a picnic day.
- 5 She sang and danced on gracefully and calm,
- 6 The light gauze hanging loose about her form;
- 7 To me she seemed a proudly-swaying palm
- 8 Grown lovelier for passing through a storm.
- 9 Upon her swarthy neck black shiny curls
- 10 Luxuriant fell; and tossing coins in praise,
- 11 The wine-flushed, bold-eyed boys, and even the girls,
- 12 Devoured her shape with eager, passionate gaze;
- 13 But looking at her falsely-smiling face,
- 14 I knew her self was not in that strange place.

the dancer's beauty and grace with her internal sense of detachment and unhappiness, suggesting that appearances don't always reflect people's true selves. The audience's *perception* of the dancer as an alluring physical presence who delights in entertaining them conflicts with her *reality*, and through this contrast the poem implies a stark difference between people's inner and outer lives—between who they are, and who they may present themselves to be.

The poem begins by presenting the dancer through the eyes of young audience members who relish her physical appearance and sensual beauty. They delight in her “perfect, half-clothed body” and watch her with an “eager, passionate gaze.”

The speaker, meanwhile, offers rich descriptions of the dancer that emphasize her grace, courage, and dignified beauty. Even so, the speaker still focuses on the dancer's appearance, and absent from all these observations is the perspective of the dancer herself. Everything the poem says about the dancer is based on the way the audience perceives her.

The poem makes it clear that this perception doesn't line up with the dancer's actual feelings. In its last two lines, the speaker describes the dancer's face as “falsely-smiling” and says that “her self was not in that strange place.” In other words, the dancer's true self isn't really there in the nightclub; her mind is far away. Her performance, then, is just that: a performance. The tension between the dancer's two selves adds a sense of poignancy to the poem. Knowing that the dancer isn't actually enjoying herself all that much casts the entire scene in a new light, suggesting that the joyful atmosphere exists only in the audience's mind.

Of course, even the assertion that the dancer is not really “in that strange place” depends on the speaker's perspective alone. Readers never get to hear from the dancer herself, and thus, following the poem's own logic, never really get to know what she's thinking. Even apparently neutral, descriptive statements (such as, “She sang and danced on gracefully and calm”) express the speaker's personal judgment of the dancer. She may look graceful and calm to the speaker, but her internal detachment and implied unhappiness suggest a strikingly different inner reality.

To that end, maybe the other audience members aren't all that happy to be there either; perhaps their own minds are elsewhere, or their rowdy behavior is covering up inner turmoil. In any case, the poem speaks to the often stark contrast between the way things *look* and the way things *are*, as well as the limits of perception when it comes to knowing someone else's inner world.



SUMMARY

The speaker describes an audience was filled with young people and young sex workers who laughed and clapped while watching the scantily dressed woman move her perfect body smoothly to the music. Her voice sounded like flutes being played by a band of Black musicians at a picnic. The dancer sang and danced with elegance as the thin fabric of her clothing gently draped across her body. The speaker compares the dancer to a palm tree confidently moving back and forth in the wind, and which only becomes more beautiful for withstanding bad weather. The dancer's glossy, black curls fell beautifully on her dark-skinned neck. The young men in the audience, red-faced and uninhibited from drinking wine, showed their appreciation for the dancer by throwing money at her. Both these men and the young women in the audience had their eyes glued to the dancer, seeming to consume her body with their hungry, intense stares. The speaker, however, saw that the dancer's smile wasn't real, and understood that her true, inner self wasn't really present in that strange nightclub at all.



THEMES

PERCEPTION VS. REALITY

“The Harlem Dancer” presents a brief, vivid portrait of an exotic dancer in what's implied to be a nightclub. The poem contrasts

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 2-5
- Lines 7-8
- Lines 12-14

HUMAN DIGNITY AND BLACK BEAUTY

The speaker describes the dancer with nuance and sensitivity, portraying her art as beautiful, elegant, and expressive. In so doing, the speaker elevates the dancer's body and profession, giving her the respect the rest of the audience (and, implicitly, society at large) denies her.

"The Harlem Dancer" was written in the early 20th century, a time of especially restrictive social and racial norms, and it takes place in Harlem, a historically Black neighborhood of New York City. Considering this context, the poem's sympathy for someone on the edges of society—a Black woman dancing for tips in a seedy nightclub—powerfully insists on treating people like the dancer with empathy and respect.

The audience members see the dancer as an alluring, sensual object whose purpose is to entertain them in exchange for money. To the "applauding youths" and "young prostitutes" of the audience, the dancer is a "perfect, half-clothed body" and a "shape" to be "[d]evoured," but nothing more. By "tossing coins in praise" and visually devouring her, the onlookers reduce the dancer to an object to be bought and consumed, denying her any sense of human agency.

The audience's rowdy, sensual, almost predatory vision of the dancer contrasts with the speaker's treatment of the dancer as an emblem of grace and dignity. The speaker, like the rest of the audience, appreciates the dancer's physical beauty, but he describes that beauty with reverence and respect rather than callousness.

The comparisons of the dancer's voice and body to "the sound of blended flutes" and "a proudly-swaying palm" express the tender humanity the speaker feels toward her. The speaker's final assertion that the dancer is "falsely-smiling" and detached from her surroundings recognizes that the dancer is a real person with her own feelings and dreams, not just a beautiful object of desire and source of pleasure for the audience.

The speaker's tender portrayal of the dancer also comments more broadly on the injustice of a society that dehumanizes and devalues large groups of people like the dancer: Black people, women, entertainers, and others who are marginalized, exploited, or ignored. It's also worth noting that at the time the poem was written, Harlem was a poorer, mostly Black neighborhood, and the dancer may be performing in the nightclub out of basic economic necessity. Likewise, the young audience members (at least some of whom are likely Black too) may simply be seeking some small amount of entertainment, comfort, or distraction from the difficulties of their own day-to-

day lives.

The poem thus shines a light on social, racial, and economic injustice while also celebrating the beauty that manages to endure. In this way, "The Harlem Dancer" is a classic early example of the kind of examination of Black reality and celebration of Black beauty that defined the Harlem Renaissance.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Line 2
- Lines 3-4
- Lines 7-8
- Lines 9-14

**LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS****LINES 1-2**

*Applauding youths laughed with young prostitutes
And watched her perfect, half-clothed body sway;*

The first two lines of "The Harlem Dancer" set the scene and indicate some of the key ways poetic language will be used throughout the poem. The title has already provided important information: the poem is set in Harlem, and it is about a dancer. The early-20th-century historical context indicates that the poem likely takes place in a nightclub. Therefore, the first line is free to dive right into the action, creating the powerful impression that the poem begins in the middle of a scene that has already been going on. That scene is initially dominated, somewhat [paradoxically](#), by the audience, not the dancer:

Applauding youths laughed with young prostitutes

The first line's meter is not the typical [iambic](#) pentameter of an English [sonnet](#)—at least, not exactly. The first two feet are perfect iambs, but then the **stressed** and **unstressed** syllables get jumbled around a bit. This metrical play emphasizes the applause, laughter, and youth of the audience members. In fact, the emphatic stresses of "youths laughed" and "young prostitutes" seem to mimic the sounds of laughter and applause—just saying the first line out loud gives the feeling of being in a noisy, rowdy nightclub. This use of meter to echo the meaning and feeling of a line will continue throughout the poem.

But it's not just meter that helps the first line create such a powerful atmosphere. The words "youths" and "young" are connected by [alliteration](#) on the /y/ sound, and strong [assonance](#) between "youths" and "prostitutes" creates an [internal slant rhyme](#). Moreover, alliteration on the /l/ sound links the audience's applause and laughter, magnifying their

sonic effect and making them seem perhaps more sinister than friendly. These sonic devices link the "youths" (who are otherwise unidentified) and "young prostitutes" as a collective, rowdy audience. That strong connection is important because, as will soon be clear, both the dancer and the speaker feel detached from this crowd. That detachment is central to the poem's theme of Perception vs. Reality.

The fact that the poem opens by focusing on the audience, rather than the dancer or the speaker, also contributes to that theme. The dancer's own perspective never enters the poem, and the domination of the poem's opening by the audience members indicates as much. Indeed, in line 2, the dancer enters the poem as a mere pronoun, "her." The line expresses the audience's focus on the dancer's alluring physical body, which is identified as "perfect" and "half-clothed." This time, the line does follow perfect iambic pentameter, and it is divided exactly in the middle by the comma after "perfect," which creates a [caesura](#). These structural aspects of the line reflect the dancer's body: its perfection (the meter is perfect), the way it is "half-clothed" (the line is divided into neat halves), and its swaying (the iambs "sway" between unstressed and stressed syllables, and the evenly divided line itself seems to sway).

While the dancer's body may, in fact, be both very beautiful and "half-clothed," it's notable that the poetic techniques of the line emphasize the way the dancer is seen by the audience rather than the way she sees herself. By enacting the audience's image of the dancer as a "perfect, half-clothed body," the line emphasizes the way the audience is objectifying the dancer—and, implicitly, begins to offer a critique of that objectification.

LINES 3-4

*Her voice was like the sound of blended flutes
Blown by black players upon a picnic day.*

After its initial focus on the audience members and their perception of the dancer's body, the poem turns to the speaker's description of the dancer's voice (she is singing while she dances). In a long [simile](#), the speaker compares the dancer's voice to music played by a group of Black musicians. The precise meaning of "blended flutes" and "picnic day" is not entirely clear, though the terms conjure a peaceful, idealized vision of good music, relaxation, and a strong sense of Black community. A "picnic day" may be a holiday, Sunday, or simply a day of rest filled with music, food, and companionship. The flutes could be actual flutes, improvised wind instruments, or any mix of instruments that require air to produce sound. The overall effect of the comparison is to remove the singer from the seedy nightclub—where she is surrounded by people who do not fully appreciate her—and place her in an imagined environment of peace, harmony, and community. The simile also grants her voice a great deal of artistic dignity. The speaker implies that rather than merely performing for money to an

audience that sees her as an alluring object of pleasure, the dancer is singing in a distinguished tradition of Black artistic expression. This elevation of Black art was a central goal of Harlem Renaissance poetry, of which "The Harlem Dancer" is an important early example.

Whereas the first line's meter emphasized the harsh laughter and applause of the audience, the meter of line 4 expresses the pleasing harmony of the Black players' music and the dancer's voice:

Blown by black players upon a picnic day.

Again, the meter is not standard [iambic](#) pentameter—the stresses are shifted around, and there are six of them. But the clustering of stresses in "Blown by black players" emphasizes the dignified beauty of the music, especially in combination with the [alliteration](#) on the /b/ sound, which begins in line 3 with the word "blended." The line's extra stress also lends the simile (and the music it describes) an evocative sense of power and endurance.

LINES 5-6

*She sang and danced on gracefully and calm,
The light gauze hanging loose about her form;*

The speaker now makes what seems to be a straightforward observation about the dancer. But again, the meter complicates and enriches the meaning of the lines:

*She sang and danced on gracefully and calm,
The light gauze hanging loose about her form;*

Both lines contain three stressed syllables in a row. This isn't completely unusual, especially in an English [sonnet](#), like "The Harlem Dancer," that takes a somewhat loose approach to [iambic](#) pentameter and embraces the rhythms of [colloquial](#) speech. It is notable, however, that those triple stresses are placed on words describing the grace of the dancer's movements and the lightness of her clothing, respectively. This placement of stress is [ironic](#) because the heavy stress on the words seems to contradict what the words themselves are saying. Is the dancer *really* graceful and calm? Is the gauze *really* as light as it seems? Might the word "hanging," in this context, have a slightly sinister implication?

Of course, it's difficult, if not impossible, to answer these questions with certainty. What's clear, however, is that the structure of these lines calls the speaker's observations gently into question. By extension, the lines call all observations into question, again emphasizing that the inner feelings of the dancer herself can't be known. Though she looks calm and graceful, she may not feel that way inside. These early, subtle indications that there is more to the dancer than meets the eye will become central to the effect of the final lines of the poem.

LINES 7-8

*To me she seemed a proudly-swaying palm
Grown lovelier for passing through a storm.*

The speaker makes another lofty comparison about the dancer, this time using a [metaphor](#) to compare her to a beautiful palm tree. Although the earlier [simile](#) about the dancer's voice expressed the speaker's perspective, the speaker emphasizes the personal nature of this second comparison with the words "[t]o me." The implication is that the dancer seems beautiful and dignified like a palm tree to the speaker *only*, not to the rest of the audience. In this way, the metaphor sets the speaker apart from the young audience and strengthens his or her close identification with the dancer.

The speaker's choice to call the palm "proudly-swaying" echoes the way the audience, in line 2, watches the dancer's body "sway." The repetition of the word critiques of the way the rest of the audience objectifies the dancer. While they only see a sensually swaying body, the speaker sees the dancer's movements as an expression of her art, human dignity, and perseverance through adversity. The palm tree becomes a [symbol](#) of true beauty and the ability to weather the harsh challenges (or the "storm[s]") of life, especially life as a Black woman on the fringes of early-20th-century society.

Unlike much of the poem so far, lines 7 and 8 both follow regular [iambic](#) pentameter, which emphasizes the palm tree's (and thus, the dancer's) proud, constant swaying through whatever storm life throws at it. The regular meter also bestows a sense of genuine dignity and calm on the dancer; this vision starkly contrasts, again, with the way the audience sees the dancer as a mere object of sensual pleasure. The strong alliteration on the /p/ and /s/ sounds also makes the lines "lovelier" in a poignant way.

LINES 9-10

*Upon her swarthy neck black shiny curls
Luxuriant fell;*

Line 9 marks the beginning of the [sestet](#) in "The Harlem Dancer," an English [sonnet](#), and the speaker's attention now "turns" to the dancer's physical appearance. However, unlike the sensual, aggressive gaze of the rest of the audience, the speaker's eyes focus admiringly on the dancer's Blackness, which becomes a source of true beauty. "Swarthy" means black or dark-skinned; the dancer's neck and "shiny curls" are both identified as being black in color. Blackness becomes an important point of connection to the dancer for the speaker, who may be Black as well.

The [meter](#) and [enjambment](#) of the lines emphasize the dancer's elegance and beauty:

Upon her swarthy neck black shiny curls
Luxuriant fell;

Line 9 contains a tight grouping of stressed syllables. The accumulation of stresses at the end of the line—which spills over straight into the next via a strong enjambment—emphasizes how the dancer's mass of curls fall luxuriantly upon her neck. The enjambment enacts the elegant, swooping motion of the dancer's hair, which is given gorgeous presence by the stresses and the densely [consonant](#) sounds of the lines. The unexpected placement of the word "[l]uxuriant" also contributes to the overall effect. The lines seem to mean that the dancer's curls fell *luxuriantly*; this use of an adjective as an adverb is a form of [colloquialism](#). Similar moments have occurred in lines 5 ("gracefully and calm") and 6 ("gauze hanging loose"), though this is the most powerful example.

LINES 10-12

*and tossing coins in praise,
The wine-flushed, bold-eyed boys, and even the girls,
Devoured her shape with eager, passionate gaze;*

The poem again describes the youthful audience, providing a closer look at their reaction to the dancer. The audience members throw coins toward the dancer, which is both a show of "praise" and a further sign of the way they objectify her. The speaker's mention of money broadens the poem's social critique to include an economic element. In the early 20th century, when "The Harlem Dancer" was written, Harlem was a relatively poor, mostly African-American neighborhood. It was common to see people, like the dancer in the poem, performing in nightclubs or on the street for tips in order to support themselves. At that time, white people (who generally had more money than Black people) were beginning to venture into Harlem to enjoy the neighborhood's supposedly exotic, seedy nightlife for themselves. The poem implicitly critiques a society in which people like the dancer are dehumanized and seen as mere objects of pleasure to be bought with "coins."

In line 11, the speaker describes the "boys" of the audience using two hyphenated adjectives: "wine-flushed" and "bold-eyed." In line 12, the speaker uses another pair of adjectives to describe the audience's gaze as "eager" and "passionate." This intense description—along with strong [consonance](#) on the /b/, /p/, and /g/ sounds—makes these lines feel like the climax of the dancer's performance, or at least the height of the audience's enjoyment. Indeed, the speaker uses a powerful [metaphor](#) to compare the way the audience "gaze[s]" at the dancer to people devouring food at a ravenous feast. All of this dense [figurative language](#) mirrors the wild aggression of the audience and communicates the speaker's tender sympathy for the dancer, whom he can only watch be "[d]evoured."

The speaker is careful to point out that "even the girls" in the audience participate in the visual feast. That distinction is notable, especially because social and gender norms at the beginning of the 20th century were far more strict than they are today. It wouldn't have been seen as normal or acceptable

for "girls" to be looking at the alluring body of another female in such a way. The comment, however, does not censure any possible same-sex desire; rather, it critiques the objectification and dehumanization the audience's desire involves. The poem thus subtly nods to the perhaps more permissive social reality of Harlem at the time while insisting on the dignity and humanity of people like the dancer.

LINES 13-14

*But looking at her falsely-smiling face,
I knew her self was not in that strange place.*

The poem's final lines cast everything that has come before in a new and poignant light. The dancer has been hungrily enjoyed by the audience and described by the speaker as calm, graceful, and beautiful. Now, she is seen in a deeper way. Her beautiful, smiling face is revealed to be a false performance; her outer appearance does not reflect her true, inner reality.

These lines mark an important shift in the poem. Until now, the central tension has been between the objectifying way the audience views the dancer and the more sensitive, dignified way the speaker views her. Throughout, the perspective of the dancer herself has not appeared in the poem. Now, the speaker attempts to account for that perspective by actually considering how the dancer feels. In so doing, the speaker realizes that the dancer's true "self" is not in the "strange place" of the nightclub, but in an unidentified elsewhere.

As in the rest of the poem, the meter highlights the meaning of the lines. In particular, the long, strongly stressed syllables of "strange place" emphasize just how strange the nightclub really is. That emphasis forces a reconsideration of what might have seemed a normal or even pleasant, festive setting. The nightclub is revealed for the strange, undistinguished, lowly social space it really is. The revelation both furthers the poem's critique of the rowdy audience and complicates it—after all, the speaker is present in the nightclub too! The spectators may simply be seeking relief from their daily lives; their behavior toward the dancer does not necessarily make them bad people. The Harlem nightclub is ultimately seen as the product of an unequal and unjust society that values some types of people while devaluing others.



SYMBOLS

PALM TREE

Palm trees often grow in beautiful, tropical places, where they must withstand frequent, heavy storms. By comparing the dancer to a palm tree through a [metaphor](#), the speaker imaginatively removes the dancer from the poem's shady and undistinguished nightclub setting, elevating her as an emblem of pride, perseverance, and dignity. The speaker recognizes that the dancer has faced challenges in her life, but she has done her

best to overcome them—and for that, she has become "lovelier." On a larger level, the palm tree may also symbolize the way Black people have triumphed over the significant oppression and exploitation they have faced throughout history, especially in the United States. In this way, the poem becomes a moving testament to the dignity, beauty, and resilience of Black people like the Harlem dancer.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-8:** "To me she seemed a proudly-swaying palm / Grown lovelier for passing through a storm."



POETIC DEVICES

ASSONANCE

"The Harlem Dancer" contains quite a few instances of [assonance](#), which is often used to create connections between words or to emphasize a point. For example, in line 1, the assonance between "youths" and "prostitutes" joins those two groups of people into a single, collective, rowdy audience. In line 4, the repetition of the vowel sound /ay/ in "players" and "day" mimics the "sound of blended flutes" to which the speaker compares the dancer's voice. In both of these cases, the similarity of sounds is so close that it produces an [internal slant rhyme](#), though assonance is the primary poetic device creating the rhyming effect.

In general, assonance in "The Harlem Dancer" gives a special effect to the words sharing vowel sounds. That special effect can be calming, as in "on" and "calm," where the repeated sound emphasizes the calmness with which the dancer keeps on dancing. It can be rousing, as in the clean /e/ sounds of "To me she seemed," which make the speaker's [metaphor](#) seem more personal and heartfelt. In lines 11 and 12, several overlapping assonances contribute to the feeling of menace inspired by the boys and girls who devour the dancer. And in the final line, the long /a/ sounds of "strange place" cause the words to linger, prompting a poignant reflection on how and why the nightclub got to be so strange.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Applauding," "youths," "young," "prostitutes"
- **Line 2:** "watched," "body"
- **Line 4:** "players," "day"
- **Line 5:** "on," "calm"
- **Line 6:** "gauze," "form"
- **Line 7:** "me she seemed"
- **Line 11:** "bold," "boys"
- **Line 12:** "her," "shape," "eager," "gaze"
- **Line 13:** "face"
- **Line 14:** "strange place"

ALLITERATION

[Alliteration](#) often works alongside [assonance](#), [consonance](#), and other poetic devices to emphasize key moments in the poem. For example, the repetition of the /b/ and /p/ sounds in lines 3 and 4 reflects the beautiful sound of the "blended flutes" to which the speaker, in a long [simile](#), compares the dancer's voice. The alliteration also gives the dancer a stirring sense of dignity, which contrasts with the careless way the rest of the audience appreciates her.

In the [metaphor](#) in lines 7 and 8, alliteration adds a similar effect. The repeated /s/ and /p/ sounds, which roughly alternate, enhance the impression that the palm tree—and by extension, the dancer—is "proudly-swaying." In fact, the sounds themselves seem to sway with pride, mirroring the continual motion of the palm and the dancer.

Of course, alliteration doesn't always mark positive or happy moments in the poem. In line 11, the "bold-eyed boys" seem even more predatory thanks to the repeated /b/ sound. Similarly, the dancer's "falsely-smiling face" seems especially false and poignant as a result of the alliteration. And in the last line, the shared /s/ sound of "self" and "strange" [ironically](#) emphasizes the distance the dancer feels between "her self" and the "strange place" of the nightclub.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Applauding," "youths," "laughed," "young," " , " "prostitutes"
- **Lines 1-1:** " / "
- **Lines 2-2:** " // , "
- **Line 2:** "her," "perfect," "half"
- **Line 3:** "blended"
- **Line 4:** "Blown by black," "players," " upon," "picnic"
- **Lines 4-4:** " / "
- **Line 5:** "She sang"
- **Line 6:** "light," "loose"
- **Line 7:** "she seemed," "proudly-swaying palm"
- **Line 8:** "passing," "storm"
- **Line 9:** "swarthy," "shiny"
- **Line 11:** "bold," "boys"
- **Line 13:** "falsely," "face"
- **Line 14:** "self," "strange"

CONSONANCE

[Consonance](#) performs many of the same functions in the poem as [alliteration](#), though importantly, its effect is even richer. This is because consonance includes all instances of alliteration plus all repetitions of consonant sounds that do not qualify as alliteration.

A good example of this is the effect produced in line 9 by the /k/ sound, which is repeated three times. The repetition closely links the words "neck," "black," and "curls," and together with

the metrical stresses of the line, the consonance lends the dancer's black hair a sense of robustness and beauty.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Line 2
- Line 3
- Line 4
- Line 5
- Line 6
- Line 7
- Line 8
- Line 9
- Line 10
- Line 11
- Line 12
- Line 13
- Line 14

SIMILE

In lines 3 and 4, the speaker uses a [simile](#) to compare the dancer's voice to the music of a band of Black musicians. The simile praises and humanizes the dancer by placing her within a distinguished Black artistic tradition of harmony, peace, and happiness. The speaker suggests with sympathy and compassion that the dancer belongs in a more beautiful and dignified setting than the seedy Harlem nightclub where the poem literally takes place.

Though there is only one simile in the poem, the speaker uses a similar [figure of speech](#), a [metaphor](#), to compare the dancer to a palm tree in lines 7 and 8. Together, these comparisons assert that the dancer is a dignified, beautiful, and fully human artist.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "Her voice was like the sound of blended flutes / Blown by black players upon a picnic day."

METAPHOR

There are two complex [metaphors](#) in "The Harlem Dancer." In the first, the speaker compares the dancer to a "proudly-swaying" palm tree. The metaphor works together with the [simile](#) in lines 3 and 4 to transform the dancer into an emblem of beauty and dignity. Notably, the speaker's use of the term "proudly-swaying" lends a positive sense to the word "sway," which is used in line 2 to describe the way the rest of the audience views the dancer's alluring physical body. The second half of the metaphor admires the dancer for her perseverance through adversity—perhaps the challenges that have led her to dance for money in the Harlem nightclub—and claims that she is more beautiful because of it.

The second metaphor of the poem takes the form of an action.

The speaker describes the young audience members as "[d]evour[ing]" the dancer with their "eager, passionate gaze." Of course, it is impossible to truly devour someone just by looking at them; the metaphor characterizes the audience's gaze as aggressive, predatory, and perhaps destructive. The destructive sense of the word "devour" poignantly carries through to the poem's final couplet: perhaps the dancer's true "self" is not there in the nightclub because the oppressive force of the audience (or society at large) has consumed it.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-8:** "To me she seemed a proudly-swaying palm / Grown lovelier for passing through a storm."
- **Line 12:** "Devoured her shape with eager, passionate gaze;"

ENJAMBMENT

[Enjambment](#) occurs only four times in "The Harlem Dancer," but it has a powerful effect when it does. The very first line is enjambed, resulting in a close connection between the "youths" and "young prostitutes" of the audience and their action: the way they "watched her perfect, half-clothed body sway."

The next two instances of enjambment, in lines 3 and 7, are similar. They both occur within a long [figure of speech](#)—a [simile](#) and [metaphor](#), respectively—to which they lend a sense of continuity, coherence, and dignity. The enjambments allow the speaker to extend his or her comparisons and make them more richly detailed. In line 7, the enjambment is especially important since the comparison is not merely to a palm tree; that palm tree has "[g]rown lovelier for passing through a storm." In much the same way, the speaker's metaphor has itself grown lovelier for not having stopped at line 7 and instead continuing into line 8.

The last example of enjambment is perhaps the most powerful. The line break between "curls" and "Luxuriant fell" dramatizes the falling motion of the dancer's beautiful black hair onto her neck. In this way, the enjambment creates a reading experience that mirrors what the speaker is describing; it is as if the curls fall luxuriantly into the next line as well as onto the dancer's neck. The effect of this enjambment is especially powerful because it works together with the [consonance](#) and repeated stresses at the end of line 9 and the [colloquialism](#) at the beginning of line 10.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "prostitutes / And watched"
- **Lines 3-4:** "flutes / Blown"
- **Lines 7-8:** "palm / Grown lovelier"
- **Lines 9-10:** "curls / Luxuriant fell"

COLLOQUIALISM

"The Harlem Dancer" contains three similar instances of [colloquial](#) language. In each case, a word that is usually an adjective, like "calm," is used as an adverb. This non-standard English usage was likely inspired by the colloquial speech of people in Harlem, who were mostly African-American.

Colloquial language, especially when used in poetry, is often highly expressive, and the colloquialisms in "The Harlem Dancer" are no exception. Besides fitting more smoothly into the dominant meter, [iambic](#) pentameter, the adjectives-turned-adverbs enhance the meaning of the lines in which they appear. In line 5, the short, simple word "calm" makes the dancer seem even calmer than the longer word "calmly" would have. Likewise, "loose" instead of "loosely," in line 6, grounds the description of the dancer's clothing and makes the speaker's voice more intimate and authentic. Both colloquialisms also root the poem in its specific social, historical, and linguistic setting of early-20th-century Harlem.

In line 10, the expressiveness of the colloquial adverb "[l]uxuriant" creates a moment of truly beautiful physical description. Together with the [consonance](#), clustered stresses, and strong [enjambment](#) of line 9, the colloquialism emphasizes the true elegance of the dancer's hair as she dances. Claude McKay seems to have been aware of the power of the word: earlier versions of the poem contained the less-impactful word "Profusely," but he changed it to "Luxuriant" when the poem was republished in 1922.

Where Colloquialism appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "calm"
- **Line 6:** "loose"
- **Line 10:** "Luxuriant"



VOCABULARY

Swarthy () - "Swarthy" means dark-skinned or black.

Shape (Line 2, Line 6, Line 12) - "Shape" refers to the dancer's physical body, but it also suggests that the audience only sees the dancer's outline, not her complete self. The way the dancer is reduced from a "body" to a "form" to a mere "shape" reflects the way the audience dehumanizes and objectifies her as the poem goes on.

Sway (Line 2, Line 7) - To move smoothly back and forth or in different directions. The word emphasizes the elegance and beauty of the dancer's physical movements.

Blended Flutes (Line 3) - The various instruments played by Black musicians on picnic or rest days, likely in times of slavery. "Blended" refers both to how different instruments were used by different players and to the way their sounds combined, or

blended, in harmony. The instruments might have been actual "flutes," but the word more likely refers to improvised wind or reed instruments. It may also be a term for any wind or brass instrument in general.

Picnic Day (Line 4) - A day of rest or a holiday, usually a Sunday, when Black people would relax and celebrate with food and music. The term may refer to the times of slavery, when such days would have been rare and highly prized.

Gauze (Line 6) - The dancer's clothes are made of this thin, probably translucent or transparent material. The word can also refer to material used for medical dressings, but that meaning doesn't really apply here.

Devoured (Line 12) - To "devour" is to eat something eagerly, often in a predatory or destructive way. Here, the word is being used metaphorically to describe the way the audience members hungrily look at the dancer.



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Harlem Dancer" is an English sonnet (also called a Shakespearean sonnet). English sonnets like this one consist of a single, fourteen-line stanza. That stanza can be divided into an eight-line section called an octave, itself made up of two four-line quatrains, and a six-line sestet, made up of another quatrain and a final two-line couplet:

- Octave
 - Quatrain
 - Quatrain
- Sestet
 - Quatrain
 - Couplet

Like many other English sonnets, "The Harlem Dancer" includes a "turn" in line 9, the beginning of the sestet. Whereas the octave sets the scene and then introduces an elaborate [metaphor](#) comparing the dancer to a "proudly-swaying palm," the sestet returns to a description of the dancer's physical body, her actual surroundings, and the audience's questionable behavior. The sudden return to the poem's literal setting prepares the couplet's revelation that the dancer's true self is not in the nightclub. In some English sonnets, especially the famous sonnets of Shakespeare, the couplet often summarizes or restates the poem's first twelve lines. In "The Harlem Dancer," however, the couplet deeply complicates the rest of the poem and casts the twelve lines that have come before in a starkly new light.

Among Harlem Renaissance writers, Claude McKay was well-known for using traditionally European forms, especially the sonnet, to depict aspects of African-American life that had been

neglected by European and white American writers. "The Harlem Dancer" is just one of many poems in which he uses a form often associated with love poetry (again, Shakespeare's sonnets are a famous example) to bestow beauty, close attention, and humanity on Black subjects, who were denied those things by white society. By putting his own twist on the sonnet and using the form to depict Black people with elegance and dignity, McKay insisted that Black life should be the subject of serious poetry and proved that Black writers deserved a place in the American canon.

METER

"The Harlem Dancer," like most English [sonnets](#), is written in the prevailing meter of [iambic](#) pentameter. However, in the poem, McKay often employs a loose version of iambic pentameter. He frequently adds, eliminates, or alters the usual order of **stressed** and **unstressed** syllables in order to emphasize different aspects of the poem's meaning. This more flexible meter is highly expressive, and it allows McKay to embrace the traditions of English poetry while also putting his own spin on them. That rhythmic spin, which also helps his poems accommodate the rhythms of Black colloquial speech, is a central reason behind McKay's importance to the Harlem Renaissance.

The poem's very first line indicates that the meter will be iambic pentameter, but with a twist:

Applauding youths laughed with young prostitutes

The line has ten syllables, five unstressed and five stressed, just like a typical line of iambic pentameter. But the usual unstressed–stressed order of those syllables is only consistent for the first two feet; the remaining three feet are a [trochee](#), [spondee](#), and pyrrhic, respectively. Those unexpected metrical feet shift the stresses of the line, thus placing special emphasis on the youth and laughter of the audience. The forceful, loud sounds of the clustered stresses also make the audience's laughter and applause seem harsh, maybe even sinister, instead of pleasant and friendly.

Of course, there are some lines that follow the standard pattern of iambic pentameter, like lines 7 and 8:

To me she seemed a proudly-swaying palm
Grown lovelier for passing through a storm.

The poem's tendency to stretch and play with the meter makes moments of metrical regularity, especially two regular iambic pentameter lines in a row, feel particularly important. In this case, the strong unstressed–stressed pattern of these lines supports the speaker's view of the dancer as "a proudly-swaying palm." As the dancer sways back and forth, persevering through the "storm" of her undesirable surroundings, so beat

the lines' stresses.

RHYME SCHEME

"The Harlem Dancer" follows the typical rhyme scheme of an English (or Shakespearean) [sonnet](#):

ABABCDCDEFEGG

Notably, McKay uses [assonance](#) to create several instances of [internal slant rhyme](#). The chime between "youths" and "prostitutes" establishes a connection between the two groups of the audience and mirrors the sound of the applause and laughter the line describes. Similarly, the rhyme between "players" and "day" reflects the "blend[ing]" of the "flutes" and the harmony of the music. The final instance of internal slant rhyme, "strange place," joins the doubly **stressed** meter at the end of the line (which is also the end of the poem) in strongly emphasizing the dancer's alienation from her surroundings.

McKay subtly plays with the rhyme scheme in other ways. The rhyme sounds of the second [quatrain](#) (lines 5–8) are closely linked by the [consonant](#) repetition of the /m/ sound. The sounds are similar, but not the same. The closeness of the sounds emphasizes the dancer's calm, smooth motions and her perseverance through adversity. It also relates to the [theme](#) of Perception vs. Reality since the rhyme sounds may appear to be the same, but they are actually slightly different.

There is a similar closeness of rhyme sounds between "praise" and "gaze" and the [couplet's](#) rhyme words, "face" and "place." Here, the sonic similarity emphasizes how the rowdy audience members do not or cannot see the dancer's inner reality. They "gaze" at her passionately, but they do not see that her happy "face" is a false, performative one. In fact, it is their very "praise"—which is callous, exploitative, and predatory—that contributes to the radical strangeness of the "place" for the dancer and the speaker. McKay's subtle rhyming creates a visceral, poignant sense of the dancer's alienation at the end of the poem.

while the others objectify her as a mere object of entertainment and sensual pleasure.

It's impossible to know with certainty why the speaker feels isolated from the rest of the audience and claims privileged insight into the dancer's inner life. The speaker may be older than the youthful audience, an especially sensitive observer, or even an entertainer (or former entertainer) him- or herself. The speaker is likely also Black. This is suggested by the repeated attention the poem gives to the dancer's Blackness, which becomes a strong point of connection between the speaker and the dancer.



SETTING

The setting of "The Harlem Dancer" is not specifically identified, though the title indicates that the poem is set in the New York City borough of Harlem. "The Harlem Dancer" likely takes place in a nightclub around 1917, when the poem was published. At that time, it was typical to find Black entertainers, like the dancer of the poem, performing for money to a youthful crowd. It's also possible that the poem takes place on the street or in an alley—anywhere a group of people might have gathered to drink, mingle, and be entertained.

Importantly, some parts of the poem briefly venture beyond the literal setting of the nightclub. Through metaphor, the speaker imagines a peaceful rest day full of traditional Black music and a swaying palm tree (presumably in a tropical place). These imagined other places anticipate the poem's final lines, in which the speaker concludes that the dancer's true self is not really present in the nightclub. Though her body is there, her inner self is somewhere else, though the poem doesn't or can't say where. In a way, that unknown, longed-for place is also present in the poem, though only as the dancer's inner desire.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Claude McKay first published "The Harlem Dancer" in 1917 in the magazine *Seven Arts*. He published the poem, along with another [sonnet](#) called "[Invocation](#)," under the pseudonym Eli Edwards. These were the first poems McKay published in the United States. In 1920, it was reprinted in his volume *Spring in New Hampshire*. And in 1922, it appeared yet again in his famous book *Harlem Shadows* and in James Weldon Johnson's anthology *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, both of which became key texts of the Harlem Renaissance. The publication history of "The Harlem Dancer" reflects the poem's continued relevance to the Harlem Renaissance as the movement grew, from the 1910s into the 1920s, into one of America's most important cultural revolutions.



SPEAKER

The speaker of "The Harlem Dancer" is unidentified, whether by name, race, gender, or any other potential marker. While it's possible that the speaker is Claude McKay himself—he lived in Harlem and likely observed scenes that could have inspired the poem—there isn't clear evidence that this is so. However, some things are clear about the speaker. He or she doesn't identify with the young, rowdy audience members and seems to feel discomfort (or even disgust) with the way they behave toward the dancer. The speaker observes the dancer with a degree of sensitivity that starkly contrasts with the predatory way the rest of the audience "[d]evour[s]" her. He or she admires the dancer as an emblem of grace and dignified humanity, using [simile](#) and [metaphor](#) to make lofty statements of her beauty,

McKay was born in Sunny Ville, Jamaica, in 1889. His early writings explored his interest in Jamaican dialect, an interest that would later express itself in the [colloquialisms](#) of Harlem speech found in "The Harlem Dancer." As a young man, he read and admired European literature, which gave him an affection for traditional forms like the sonnet, but he also developed an interest in Jamaican culture and his African heritage. McKay moved to the U.S. in 1912 and eventually made his way to New York City, where the cultural and artistic revolution known as the Harlem Renaissance was in its very early stages. In the years that followed, he would cast his literary eye on Black American life and make a lasting mark on the movement.

Indeed, McKay is sometimes considered a precursor to the Harlem Renaissance, though most people agree that he was an early participant in and leader of the movement. Poems like "The Harlem Dancer"—with its elevation of Black life to the subject of high art and its critique of social and racial norms—especially influenced the movement's development. The [title poem](#) of McKay's 1922 collection, *Harlem Shadows*, as well as "[If We Must Die](#)" from that volume, are other important expressions of the movement's style and aims.

As an early Harlem Renaissance figure, McKay influenced many other writers, including Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, James Weldon Johnson, and others.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Harlem Renaissance grew out of several historical factors. The most important of these was the [Great Migration](#) of African-Americans from the South to the North between 1910 and 1920. This mass movement of people was caused by several factors. Black leaders, especially W. E. B. Du Bois, encouraged Black Americans to leave the South, with its scarce economic opportunities and harsh segregation laws, for the North, which was seen as a land of freedom and opportunity. World War I caused a decline in immigration from Europe, which led Northern employers to seek new sources of labor. Harlem became the destination of choice for many migrating African-Americans because of its abundant housing and growing reputation as the center of Black life—not just in New York City but in America as a whole.

With so many Black people moving to Harlem, the neighborhood quickly developed a strong cultural, artistic, and social scene that blossomed into what became known as the Harlem Renaissance. This blossoming embraced musicians (especially jazz musicians), painters, dancers (like the dancer in the poem), and beyond—as well as the writers, like McKay, who recorded the beauty and hardship of early-20th-century Black

life on the page.



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- "[The Harlem Dancer](#)" [Read Aloud](#) — Listen to a reading of the entire poem. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3scVlz4uwlw>)
- [Poets.org Entry on McKay](#) — A short entry on McKay's life and work, including a selected bibliography and links to some of his poems. (<https://poets.org/poet/claude-mckay>)
- [An Electronic Edition of Harlem Shadows](#) — An open-source edition of Harlem Shadows, McKay's groundbreaking 1922 volume in which "The Harlem Dancer" was reprinted. Includes useful critical commentary, textual history, the original 1917 text, and other resources. (<http://harlemshadows.org>)
- [The Harlem Renaissance](#) — A short post about the Harlem Renaissance by the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History & Culture. (<https://nmaahc.si.edu/blog-post/new-african-american-identity-harlem-renaissance>)
- [Poetry Foundation Entry on McKay](#) — A detailed but brief look at McKay's life and literary career, including information about his publication history and critical reception. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/claude-mckay>)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER CLAUDE MCKAY POEMS

- [Harlem Shadows](#)
- [If We Must Die](#)



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