English & Cultural Studies 1A03: Study Notes

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Claude McKay, “Harlem Dancer:

Claude McKay (1889-1948) was a Jamaican-born novelist, poet, public intellectual and social activist who formed an important part of the “Harlem Renaissance.” The Harlem Renaissance names the period between the end of the First World War and the Great Depression of the 1930s that saw an explosion of art, music, literature, social commentary and political critique produced by black men and women,

mostly centred in New York City. McKay travelled extensively and lived abroad for significant portions of his life. To a certain extent, thought of himself as a citizen of the world as much as an American citizen. His travels undoubtedly gave him a unique perspective on social and political life in the United States, about which he never ceased to write. He was fascinated and troubled by the deep forces of inequality that formed and deformed American society, focussing in particular on how that society was so fiercely striated by differences in class and race. He was for many years closely associated with the communist party; at the time, arguably, no group of thinkers and activists were more acutely knowledgeable about the problem of class and race in America than those who unabashedly identified as communists. McKay grew up steeped in the history of English literature, an education that he affirms by his choice of the sonnet form. He wrote novels and poems that were characterized by an unusual frankness about the lives of black men and women in Harlem, lives riven by racism in a white dominated America, and lives that were both energized and depleted by the joys and sorrows of everyday experience. A gay man, he wrote with candour about black gay and lesbian life in post-First World War America, and savoured the fact that, for a brief period in Harlem, gays and lesbians were able to live their lives more or less openly.

"Harlem Dancer" is a Shakespearean sonnet: 14 verses, three quatrains, each with their own rhyming sound and pattern, and concluding with a rhyming couplet. Examine the poem carefully, ensuring that you can identify those fundamental elements of the sonnet. *Knowing those elements, and knowing specifically how they work in the sonnets assigned on this course is important for thriving in 1A03.*

Like all sonnets, McKay's poem inherits and adapts the conventions and expectations associated with the long tradition of the form. He inherits and adapts the form in at least four closely interconnected ways:

1) The poem is about a woman, the focus of so many love sonnets written by men. But what McKay does is slightly unexpected. He speaks of a woman, the dancer, but also watches others watching her: the drunken boys, the young prostitutes, *both* of whom desire the dancer. And McKay's speaker has his own perspective on and his own desires for the woman. And in the couplet we glimpse, perhaps, the perspective of the dancer herself . . . although that is a more complicated question than at first appears. Do we ever know anything of the Harlem dancer, named in the poem's title? McKay's speaker suggests that he knows something special about her. Does he?
2) In claiming he has a unique perspective on the dancer, McKay's speaker faithfully reproduces another convention of love sonnets, in which the sonneteer asserts that he and he alone apprehends the beloved's true beauty, he alone understands why she is "rare" (as Shakespeare's speaker says in Sonnet 130). How does McKay underline the speaker's claim? Note how he distinguishes himself from the young men and women in the dance hall. He insists he isn't like them and doesn't view the dancer in the same desirous way that they do. Indeed, he never identifies himself as a *he*. His seeming genderlessness sets him apart, as does his implied older age. The speaker claims a certain solidarity with the dancer, identifying with her blackness, emphasizing her dignity and grace and opposing himself to those who are "devouring" her. In this poem, "race trumps gender."
3) As is the case with thousands of love sonnets, McKay's sonnet unfurls through a series of "loving" comparisons of the object of the speaker's affection with something beautiful. Suss out at least two comparisons in the poem. What do they accomplish? To where do they transport the dancer? McKay is describing and praising the dancer . . . but he is also claiming something about himself, i.e. that he has the power to "free" the dancer and to take her to a place far from the "storm" that he says led her to this spot, to this line of work, far from the noisy, crowded, super-heated atmosphere of the dance hall. Knowing specific details like the particular comparisons McKay makes is important for thriving in this course. Your TA's and I are anticipating that you will have that level of knowledge about the poems assigned on this course.
4) As is the case with thousands of love sonnets, McKay's sonnet employs the *blazon* or *blason*, meaning that part of the poem proceeds by, as it were, *itemizing* parts of the woman's body, praising each and making each feel incandescently attractive. Notice how the Harlem dancer is observed through a series of vividly realized parts: voice, curls, form, body, face.

   But McKay is also taking the love sonnet in new directions. In place of the typical idealized sonnet-woman, a woman whom the speaker usually experiences as remote, serene, and inaccessible, is a embodied "half-clothed" woman at work. McKay insists that she possesses an

intrinsic dignity and grace (How does he do so, exactly?), notwithstanding the work that she is doing. That dignity and grace, the speaker avows, is what allows her to absent herself from the "devourers." Or at least, it is what allows the speaker to imagine that abstention. But one thing is absolutely clear. The dancer is not the fair-haired and fair-skinned creature that, for example, Petrarch and Sir Philip Sidney praised in their sonnets. (Who are Petrarch and Sir Philip Sidney? Why are they important to Shakespeare?) She isn't the Dark Lady either, i.e., the woman to whom Shakespeare devoted so many sonnets, known for her darker complexion and thick hair. No, the Harlem dancer is a woman of colour, a black woman with a "swarthy neck black," upon which fall "shiny curls." McKay is contesting existing standards of beauty, affirming the blackness of the black woman in the face of a culture of poetry that is almost wholly dominated by white ideals of what constitutes beauty and desirability.

Choosing to write in the form of a sonnet, McKay proudly demonstrates his own very good education in literature and culture. But he is also selecting a form closely associated with a white, Eurocentric view of the world and thus the sorts of things that that world values. That is the same world, after all, that colonized the rest of the globe, enslaving others, including McKay's Ashanti ancestors, transported as slaves from West Africa to the plantations in Jamaica. By adopting the sonnet form, McKay uses the master's tools *against* the master. As he once said, "I have adhered to such older traditions [of poetic form, like the sonnet] for my most lawless and revolutionary passions and moods." Memorize this quotation from McKay. Explain what it means in the context of "Harlem Dancer."

Another way in which McKay's sonnet inherits the conventions and expectations associated with the sonnet form is that although it is a poem that addresses a woman or is about a woman, we never get to hear what the woman herself thinks or feels. That's the odd and revealing thing about love sonnets: they tell us very little, almost nothing, in the end about the woman to

whom they are addressed or about whom they are written, and instead tell us a great deal about the speaker, his feelings, his desires, his thoughts, his worries, his loving passion.

McKay's sonnet is subtlest and most sophisticated when it works to bring out this curious asymmetry in love sonnets. Note for example how the young audience *predates* the dancer, hungers after her. Return to the last verses of the third quatrain: how do they describe the relationship between the audience and the dancer? The speaker *says* he will have none of that. His relationship is not of the "devouring" sort, or so he says. But is that in fact the case? When he subjects the dancer to the conventions of the *blazon*, isn't he in effect cutting her body up . . . as if for a kind of meal? The drunken boys are observed "tossing coins in praise." The speaker talks like he wouldn't or couldn't dream of treating the dancer in such a way, i.e., reducing her to an object of consumption. But how different is this poem from the act of "tossing coins in praise"? Isn't McKay's speaker offering this poem of praise like a kind of currency? Throwing money and throwing down a poem are different things, but not as different as the speaker would have us believe. And let us not forget that McKay made a living from his writing. He wrote poems because he was in love with creating beautiful things, like all artists, but he also wrote poems to pay the rent and put food on the table.

The concluding couplet is the key. On the surface, the speaker says he can discern something in the dancer's face that others do not and cannot see, i.e., that the dancer is *performing* happiness without actually being happy. He claims, rather suddenly, to have a telepathic power able to see into her mind, to read something in her smile that others supposedly cannot see. And what he says he observes is this: though she is physically in the dance hall, she is not a really citizen of it: "I knew her self was not in that strange place." Does he know her to the extent that he claims or does he *wish* her knew her in that deeply intimate way, so intimate as to read her mind? Isn't telepathy a kind of "devouring," i.e., the capacity to consume another's thoughts, colonize their world, and thus know them intimately? To "know" someone means to understand that person. But in English, strangely enough, to "know" someone can also mean to have sexual knowledge of and sexual relations with that person.

The speaker acknowledges that the dancer is absent from the scene of the dance hall. She's there, but also not there, her "self," her truest "self" is elsewhere. But isn't she also absent from the poem itself, just as women are, finally, absent from all the thousands of love sonnets written by men that are finally about men's desires, wishes, hopes, and worries? And what is "that strange place"? On the surface, it is the dance hall. But "that strange place" also refers to the sonnet itself, "that strange place" in which the Harlem dancer is evoked but is also absent. She is missing from the sonnet, just as the fair-haired and fair-skinned women are missing from the sonnets written long before McKay. McKay has written a love sonnet that admits to the absence of the beloved in love sonnets. He has written a love sonnet that that draws our attention to the ways in which love sonnets are about the speaker's desires not the beloved's. The beloveds are all absent from that strange place. It will take a poet like Edna St. Vincent Millay to put an end to all that.