

Harlem Renaissance Essay – Reapers by Jean Toomer

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The Harlem Renaissance transformed African American literature and culture by creating new forms through which Black writers could represent beauty, labor, violence, migration, racial pride, political anger, folklore, music, and ordinary life. The original essay compared Claude McKay's "Harlem Dancer" with Jean Toomer's "Reapers" and correctly identified shared themes of Black experience, labor, suffering, and the emotional cost of racialized social conditions. The poems are brief, but their methods differ substantially. McKay places a Black woman on a stage before a paying audience and contrasts her graceful performance with an inward self that appears distant from the room. Toomer places agricultural workers and machinery in a field and uses a shocking image of an animal killed by a mower to expose the cold momentum of labor and mechanization. Both poems show bodies transformed into objects within systems of work, yet McKay's poem emphasizes spectatorship and interiority while Toomer's emphasizes repetitive motion, violence, and indifference. (McKay)

The Harlem Renaissance Context

The Harlem Renaissance developed most visibly during the 1920s, although its roots preceded that decade and its influence continued afterward. The Great Migration brought large numbers of African Americans from the rural South to Northern and Midwestern cities, where they encountered new opportunities alongside segregation, exploitation, and racial violence. Black newspapers, magazines, publishers, theaters, music venues, universities, and civic organizations supported artistic production. Writers debated whether art should promote racial uplift, protest injustice, explore individual psychology, preserve folk traditions, or claim freedom from any political obligation. McKay and Toomer belonged to this broad movement without sharing one program. Their poems demonstrate that Black modernism could be urban or rural, musical or mechanical, lyrical or fragmentary.

Claude McKay and "Harlem Dancer"

Claude McKay was born in Jamaica and became a major figure in Black internationalist and Harlem Renaissance literature. "Harlem Dancer" presents a nightclub performer observed by a crowd. The poem's speaker admires her body, voice, and movement, comparing her to a palm tree and describing her singing as blended with the sound of flutes. The audience responds with coins, laughter, and attention. Yet the poem ends by separating the dancer's outward smile from her inward life: her "self" appears not to be present in the room. This final turn transforms the poem from a description of sensual entertainment into a meditation on alienation, performance, and the limits of

spectatorship.

The Dancer's Performance

The dancer demonstrates skill and control despite being observed through a sexualized commercial setting. McKay's images do not simply portray her as helpless. Her movement has grace, her voice carries over the instruments, and she holds the attention of the room. At the same time, the audience's response reduces performance to consumption. Coins are tossed, eyes follow her body, and the crowd's pleasure becomes part of the economic exchange. The dancer must create intimacy for strangers while protecting an inner self. The poem thus presents performance as both artistry and labor.

Objectification and the Audience

The original essay referred generally to disrespect for Black people. "Harlem Dancer" is more specific: it shows how race, gender, sexuality, and class shape the gaze directed at a Black female performer. The "wine-flushed" and "bold-eyed" spectators treat her as an object of excitement, while the speaker attempts to see beyond the performance. Even his sympathetic observation is not completely outside the gaze because he continues describing her body through aesthetic comparison. McKay leaves the reader with an ethical question: can the speaker truly know the woman's interior life, or does he construct another interpretation of her from a distance? The ending acknowledges that some part of her remains unavailable to the audience.

The Meaning of the Dancer's Smile

The dancer's smile functions professionally. It communicates pleasure and participation even though her inner response may differ. Service and entertainment workers often manage emotion as part of labor, displaying friendliness, confidence, or desire because the role requires it. McKay's final line suggests that the smile is not transparent evidence of happiness. The distinction between visible conduct and private feeling protects the dancer from being fully possessed by the crowd. Her alienation is painful, but it is also a form of inward resistance: the spectators can purchase the performance without reaching the whole person.

Music and Sound in "Harlem Dancer"

Sound contributes to the poem's atmosphere. The dancer sings while music surrounds her, and McKay compares her voice to flutes played by picnic groups. The comparison carries the sound beyond the nightclub into an imagined outdoor scene, briefly separating her art from the commercial room. The poem itself is a sonnet, a highly structured European form adapted by a Black modernist

poet to represent Harlem nightlife. The formal control mirrors the dancer's controlled performance. Beneath apparent smoothness, the final couplet introduces psychological conflict. McKay uses traditional form not to retreat from modern racial life but to reveal it.

Jean Toomer and “Reapers”

Jean Toomer's “Reapers” appears in *Cane*, a hybrid work combining poetry, prose, drama, and sketches of Black life in the rural South and urban North. “Reapers” describes Black reapers sharpening scythes, beginning their work, and moving through a field. A modern mowing machine follows. A field rat, startled from weeds, is cut by a blade, and the machinery continues. The poem is compressed, visual, and disturbing. It does not explain what the rat symbolizes, but the juxtaposition of Black labor, sharpened blades, machinery, and an unnoticed death creates a powerful image of social and industrial violence.

Rhythm and Repetition in “Reapers”

The poem opens with repetitive action: reapers sharpen scythes and prepare for labor. The sounds of the words imitate metallic motion and continuous work. This rhythm creates inevitability. Human workers and machines participate in the same process of cutting. The poem's short lines and direct images do not provide reflective commentary; readers encounter the action almost as quickly as the rat does. Repetition makes labor appear impersonal, while the sudden killing reveals the violence embedded in routine productivity.

The Reapers as Workers

The Black reapers are described through coordinated physical action rather than individual names or personalities. This can reflect the dehumanizing organization of labor, in which workers become a group performing repetitive tasks. Yet they also possess skill: sharpening a scythe requires knowledge, and the sweeping movement is deliberate. Toomer does not romanticize manual labor as pure or naturally harmonious. The mower introduces mechanization, but the human scythes are already instruments of cutting. The poem asks whether industrial modernity changes violence or merely accelerates an existing process.

The Rat and the Mower

The rat's death is the poem's central shock. It is alive, startled, and suddenly destroyed by a blade, while the machine continues making its “way.” The word “chance” suggests accident rather than intentional cruelty, but the absence of intention does not prevent harm. The rat may represent vulnerable lives caught in systems that do not stop to acknowledge them. It may also remain a literal

animal whose death shows the ecological cost of mechanized agriculture. The poem's power lies in refusing to reduce the image to one interpretation. The machine's indifference is social, industrial, and existential at once.

Mechanization and Modernity

The original comparison said both poems concern "job behaviors." Toomer's poem more sharply addresses mechanization. The mowing machine competes with and extends human labor. Modern technology can increase efficiency and reduce physical strain, but it can also distance workers from consequences and intensify production. In "Reapers," the machine does not pause, mourn, or revise its path. It represents a process whose measure of success is movement through the field. The poem reflects wider Harlem Renaissance interest in how Black life would be affected by industrial modernity and migration.

Shared Theme: Bodies Within Systems of Labor

Both poems place bodies inside economic systems. McKay's dancer uses voice and movement to earn money before spectators. Toomer's reapers use repetitive physical labor, while the rat becomes collateral damage to production. Neither poem presents work as simply dignified or degrading. The dancer displays artistry, and the reapers display skill, but their labor is framed by forces that reduce individuality. The audience consumes the dancer; the agricultural process consumes motion, land, and life. The poems reveal human capacity while questioning the systems that profit from it.

Shared Theme: Detachment

Detachment appears in different forms. McKay's dancer is physically present but psychologically distant. Her inner self is "not in that strange place." Toomer's mower is incapable of feeling and continues after killing the rat. In one poem, detachment protects a human being from an intrusive audience; in the other, mechanical indifference allows harm to go unrecognized. Both endings produce emotional distance: the dancer's smile conceals alienation, while the mower's motion eliminates any pause for grief.

Shared Theme: Visibility and Invisibility

The dancer is intensely visible as an object of attention but invisible as a complete person. The rat is nearly invisible until the blade reveals it through death. The reapers are visible as a working group but not as individual lives. This tension reflects a central problem in African American modernist art: Black bodies are often watched, categorized, and used while Black subjectivity remains unrecognized. McKay counters this by insisting on hidden interiority. Toomer counters it by making a discarded

death unforgettable through poetic image.

Race in the Two Poems

McKay explicitly locates the poem within Harlem and identifies the dancer through racial description, placing Black female performance at the center. Toomer identifies the reapers as Black but offers no direct racial commentary. The rural Southern setting and history of Black agricultural labor nevertheless give the image social weight. Neither poem reduces race to a slogan. McKay explores the gaze and commodification; Toomer explores labor, technology, and vulnerability. Their indirectness requires readers to connect form and history rather than search only for explicit protest language.

Gender

Gender is central to “Harlem Dancer” because the woman’s body is commercialized before a predominantly observing crowd. Her labor depends on performing an image of availability while preserving inner distance. “Reapers” presents workers in conventionally masculine agricultural labor and does not develop individual gender identity. Its violence is directed toward an animal rather than a woman, but the poem’s machinery and blades create a hard, forceful environment. Comparing the works shows how Black modernist poets represented different kinds of embodied labor: sexualized performance and agricultural production.

Urban and Rural Settings

McKay’s nightclub represents urban Harlem, entertainment, money, and a mixed crowd. Toomer’s field represents the rural South, agriculture, seasonal labor, and the arrival of machinery. The Harlem Renaissance did not reject rural Black life in favor of the city. Writers carried Southern memory, folk culture, and agricultural history into urban artistic movements. The contrast between poems reflects the migration linking these spaces. The city promises visibility and opportunity but creates new forms of commodification; the countryside contains tradition and nature but also exploitation and violence.

Form and Technique

“Harlem Dancer” uses the sonnet’s organized rhyme and meter, extended description, and final interpretive turn. “Reapers” uses eight compressed lines, repetition, harsh sound, and a sudden image. McKay’s form allows the reader to enter the atmosphere and then reconsider it. Toomer’s form strikes quickly and leaves the reader with unresolved violence. The difference supports each subject. The dancer’s controlled performance unfolds within formal control, while the mower’s blade interrupts the poem’s rhythmic labor with shock.

Which Poem Offers More Hope?

Neither poem is conventionally optimistic. “Reapers” ends with machinery continuing after death, offering no visible resistance. “Harlem Dancer” contains a limited form of autonomy because the woman’s inner self remains beyond the audience’s reach. Her art also has beauty despite exploitation. However, inward escape does not change the conditions of labor. McKay preserves personhood; Toomer exposes a system that appears incapable of recognition. The difference is between concealed survival and impersonal continuation.

The Poems and Harlem Renaissance Aims

Both poems expand the range of subjects considered worthy of serious art. A nightclub dancer and agricultural workers become centers of formal literary attention. The poems neither idealize respectable middle-class life nor explain Black experience for a white audience through simple instruction. They trust image, rhythm, and ambiguity. This artistic freedom was itself significant. The Harlem Renaissance asserted that Black writers could employ any form and address any aspect of life, including sexuality, alienation, machinery, animal death, and psychological distance. (Hutchinson)

Conclusion

“Harlem Dancer” and “Reapers” portray Black bodies within systems of labor, but they produce different emotional and formal effects. McKay’s sonnet presents a skilled performer whose outward beauty and smile conceal an inward self detached from the consuming crowd. Toomer’s compressed poem presents Black agricultural workers, cutting tools, a modern mower, and an animal killed without interrupting production. Both poems expose the limits of visibility: the dancer is seen without being known, and the rat becomes noticeable only as a casualty. McKay emphasizes gendered spectatorship and interior resistance, while Toomer emphasizes mechanization and impersonal violence. Together, they show the Harlem Renaissance’s range and its ability to transform ordinary work into a profound inquiry about race, body, art, and modernity.

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