Harlem Shadows

POEM TEXT

I hear the halting footsteps of a lass
In Negro Harlem when the night lets fall
Its veil. I see the shapes of girls who pass
To bend and barter at desire's call.
Ah, little dark girls who in slippered feet
Go prowling through the night from street to street!

Through the long night until the silver break
Of day the little gray feet know no rest;
Through the lone night until the last snow-flake
Has dropped from heaven upon the earth's white breast,
The dusky, half-clad girls of tired feet
Are trudging, thinly shod, from street to street.

Ah, stern harsh world, that in the wretched way
Of poverty, dishonor and disgrace,
Has pushed the timid little feet of clay,
The sacred brown feet of my fallen race!
Ah, heart of me, the weary, weary feet
In Harlem wandering from street to street.

SUMMARY

I hear the hesitant footsteps of a young woman walking through the predominantly Black neighborhood of Harlem as the night cloaks the world in darkness. I see the shapes of women passing by on their way to strike a deal with desire itself. Oh, the young Black girls with slippers on their feet scavenge through the nighttime streets!

All throughout the night, until the first light of day, the young women have no chance to rest their small, cold feet. Throughout the lonely night—until the final snowflake falls from heaven and lands on the earth's white breast—the dark-skinned, half-clothed girls with their tired feet continue to march on worn-out shoes through the streets.

Oh, the cruel world has forced poverty, dishonor, and disgrace onto these small, fragile feet—the precious brown feet of my down-trodden race! Oh, my poor heart, these exhausted feet continue to wind aimlessly through the streets of Harlem.

THEMES

POVERTY, RACISM, AND SURVIVAL

"Harlem Shadows" spotlights the difficult lives of Black sex workers in 1920s Harlem. Watching these women one night, the speaker suggests that the "stern harsh world" has forced them into a harrowing occupation out of necessity. The poem seeks to elicit sympathy for a group of people that the rest of society often overlooks, and frames their work as a means of survival in the face of poverty, racism, and disempowerment.

The poem's speaker never comes across as judgmental towards the sex workers themselves, focusing instead on the demanding nature of their work and the fact that they have few, if any, alternatives. The women must "trudg[e]" from "street to street" with "weary feet," unable to rest despite their exhaustion. They're "thinly shod" as well, wearing clothes and shoes that do little to keep out the winter cold. Through these details, the speaker highlights the toil such women go through simply to support themselves.

Such language also evokes the history of Black oppression in the U.S. and abroad. The repeated references to walking and feet evoke the seemingly endless labor on plantations during the era of American slavery, as well as the horrific forced marches of the enslaved (which led to thousands of deaths). The speaker thus links these women's circumstances to a long history of racism and oppression.

The speaker also argues that poverty has "pushed" the women into such work, intimating that economic necessity has created a situation in which they have no real choice but to sell their bodies. The world is "stern" and "harsh," and the speaker implies that the women are doing the best they can do get by in a society that doesn't care about their well-being. Facing both intense poverty and racism that prevents their social mobility, the women do what they have to in order to get by.

The poem ends with the speaker saying, "Ah, heart of me, the weary, weary feet." The phrase "heart of me" implies that the speaker feels connected to these women, as if the speaker is also carrying the "weary" burden that weighs on their "half-clad" shoulders. In this way, the poem again connects these women's struggles to the broader oppression and disempowerment of Black communities.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-18

INNOCENCE AND VULNERABILITY

The speaker repeatedly calls the sex workers in the poem "girls," and also notes how small and delicate they appear. On the one hand, these details provide a stark contrast with the dangerous and very adult nature of sex work (as it's presented in the poem, at least), implying that these women have been forced to grow up far too quickly—that society has robbed them of their innocence. Yet while some of these women certainly *are* young, the speaker isn't necessarily referring *just* to age here. The speaker is also calling attention to the way that society has rendered such women utterly vulnerable and disempowered—that is, essentially like children at the mercy of a "stern harsh world."

Early on in the poem the speaker calls the women "little dark girls" and mentions their "slippered feet." This conjures an image of actual children walking around in pajamas and slippers. The speaker goes on to say, however, that the women go "prowling through the night," an animalistic description that suggests the women searching for prey in the darkness. This, of course, is very much at odds with the image of children in pajamas, and the contrast serves to underscore the tragedy, in the speaker's mind, of women doing this kind of dangerous work; they're on the hunt, but they don't exactly strike fear into anyone's heart and could easily be hurt themselves.

Throughout the poem, the speaker continues to talk about the sex workers as if they're quite young and delicate. They walk on "little [...] feet," the speaker says, a description that once again presents them as small and childlike. And yet, these "little" feet also "know no rest," indicating that—despite their fragility—they still work past the point of exhaustion.

The speaker also says that hardship has "pushed the timid little feet of clay" into sex work, comparing the women to breakable pieces of pottery. And yet, the women keep "trudging" through the night. On one level, the poem insinuates that the need to survive in this cold and unforgiving world has plunged many young women into a particularly harsh version of adulthood. On another, the speaker simply underscores the inherently fragile, vulnerable position that these women hold in society.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 3-4
- Lines 5-6
- Line 8
- Lines 11-12
- Lines 13-18

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

I hear the halting footsteps of a lass
In Negro Harlem when the night lets fall
Its veil. I see the shapes of girls who pass
To bend and barter at desire's call.

The first four lines of "Harlem Shadows" set the scene for the rest of the poem. The speaker appeals to readers' eyes and ears through imagery, detailing the sound of "halting" footsteps and the shadowy sight of dark city streets. The word "halting" hints at a feeling of uncertainty, as if the "lass" (an old-fashioned word used to describe a young woman) that the speaker mentions is apprehensive as she makes her way through the darkness.

In lines 3 and 4, the speaker further clarifies the poem's setting by saying, "I see the shapes of girls who pass / To bend and barter at desire's call." This reveals that the women surrounding the speaker are sex workers and that they're "bend[ing]" to talk to potential clients, who most likely have stopped in their cars and rolled their windows down.

Instead of focusing on the male customers, the speaker personifies "desire." This suggests that the sex workers are dealing with pure lust—their interactions with the men aren't like normal exchanges with other human beings, since the men have been overtaken by desire itself. Driven by their sexual urges, the men try to "barter" with the women, treating them like things to be bought.

In this way, the beginning of the poem presents sex work quite unfavorably, implying that the occupation has forced these women to "bend" (or submit) to men who don't actually care about them. The opening lines also establish that the poem takes place in New York City in the predominantly Black neighborhood of Harlem. This alerts readers to the racial dynamics at play in this environment.

The poem is musical and rhythmic in these opening lines as well. Take the clear, breathless alliteration of the /h/ sound in "I hear the halting footsteps of a lass / in Negro Harlem," and also note the consonant /t/, /l/, and /s/ sounds that infuse these lines:

I hear the halting footsteps of a lass
In Negro Harlem when the night lets fall
Its veil. [...]

The sibilance here reflects the hushed nighttime atmosphere, while the percussive /t/ cuts through these lines and subtly evokes click-clacking sound of footsteps against the sidewalk.

These lines also feature iambic pentameter, meaning that each line contains five metrical feet consisting of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable. The first line, for instance, scans like this:

I hear | the halt- | ing foot- | steps of | a lass

This line features a metrical substitution, since the speaker uses a trochee (stressed-unstressed) in the fourth foot: "steps of." Still, the steady da-DUM da-DUM thump of iambic pentameter defines the rhythm of the poem's opening line. This effect matches the subject, since the rhythm mimics the sound of the woman's footsteps on the sidewalk as she passes the speaker.

LINES 5-6

Ah, little dark girls who in slippered feet
Go prowling through the night from street to street!

The speaker makes a point of establishing that the sex workers in question are Black, inviting readers to consider the racial dynamics that serve as a backdrop to the poem.

The speaker also underscores the idea that these women are quite young by referring to them as "girls." The mention of their "slippered feet" adds to this sense of youthful innocence, evoking the image of children wearing slippers and pajamas.

This youthful innocence is starkly juxtaposed against the nature of sex work—a juxtaposition the speaker highlights by going on in line 6 to say that these "slippered" girls go "prowling through the night." This metaphorical description presents the women not as little girls, but as nocturnal animals on the hunt, doing whatever they can to stay alive.

This sense of desperation once more hints at the racial dynamics that lurk in the background of the poem, as the speaker intimates that society has left impoverished Black with women with so few resources that they have no other means of supporting themselves. It also clarifies that these women aren't involved in this work because it's what they *want* to be doing, but because it's a way for them to survive in the face of disempowerment.

The first four lines follow an alternating rhyme scheme (ABAB), but lines 5 and 6 form a final rhyming couplet that brings the first stanza to a musical and cohesive conclusion:

> Ah, little dark girls who in slippered **feet**
> Go prowling through the night from **street** to **street**!

This rhyme is enhanced by the speaker's use of diacope at the end of line 6, when the word "street" (which completes the rhyme) appears twice in the span of just three words.

These lines also feature the consonant /r/ sound, which works its way through the words and adds a slight feeling of gritty intensity:

> Ah, little dark girls who in slippered feet
> Go prowling through the night from street to street!

The /r/ sound infuses the lines with a subtle growling effect, almost as if the speaker is delivering these words through clenched teeth. This, in turn, conveys the exasperation that the speaker clearly feels regarding the idea of such young, innocent girls having to engage in sex work in order to support themselves—an exasperation that is also made evident by the speaker's use of the word "Ah," which communicates frustration and distress.

LINES 7-10

Through the long night until the silver break
Of day the little gray feet know no rest;
Through the lone night until the last snow-flake
Has dropped from heaven upon the earth's white breast,

The speaker continues to use imagery to evoke the poem's environment, this time emphasizing the fact that the women are forced to endure long, cold nights. These women, the speaker says, work "through the long night" until the "last snow-flake" falls. The mention of snow underscores just how difficult it is for these women to support themselves; they have to stay outside in the cold all night long.

When the speaker describes their feet as "gray," readers will perhaps envision feet that are so cold that blood no longer properly circulates through them. And yet, the speaker also uses the word "little" to describe the women's feet, contrasting the unforgiving nature of their work with their seemingly delicate and youthful bodies.

The speaker also personifies the earth, saying that the young women stay out in the streets until the night's final snowflake has fallen "upon the earth's white breast." This characterization depicts the world as innocent, soft, and harmless—or as cold and unforgiving, depending on readers' interpretation.

This section features anaphora as well in lines 7 and 9:

- Line 7: "Through the long night [...]"
- Line 9: "Through the lone night [...]"

This not only enhances the poem's rhythm, but also highlights the fact that the sex workers are forced to stay out in the cold streets all night without any rest, underlining just how exhausting it must be to work in such unforgiving conditions.

These lines also feature assonance. In lines 7 and 8, for example, note the repeating short /i/, /ay/, and /oh/ vowel sounds:

> Through the long night until the silver break
> Of day the little gray feet know no rest

This assonance makes the speaker's words sound melodic, almost as if the poem is a mournful song that laments the hardship that these sex workers face.

LINES 11-12

The dusky, half-clad girls of tired feet

Are trudging, thinly shod, from street to street.

By calling these young women "dusky, half-clad girls," the speaker juxtaposes their skin color against the earlier image of the "earth's white breast." By saying that they are "half-clad"—that is, they aren't wearing very much clothing—the speaker also indicates that these girls are hardly dressed appropriately for the snowy weather and must be freezing.

When the speaker says that the young women "trudg[e], thinly shod, from street to street," the poem once again centers on the women's feet. The word "trudging" brings to mind a tiresome and joyless slog through hardship.

These lines contain a mixture of harsh consonance and softer, more soothing sounds. Consider, for example, the abrasive /k/ and /t/ sounds here:

> The dusky, half-clad girls of tired feet
> Are trudging, thinly shod, from street to street

The /k/ and /t/ sounds give the speaker's words a sharp, prickly edge, adding a certain amount of frustration or bitterness to the poem's tone. The speaker is, after all, lamenting the fact that these young women have such difficult lives.

At the same time, the speaker uses sibilant sounds to suggest the quiet, sinister night. In addition to the /s/ sound, the speaker uses the /sh/, /z/, /f/, and /th/ sounds, all of which are often considered sibilant:

> The dusky, half-clad girls of tired feet
> Are trudging, thinly shod, from street to street

These soft, shushing sounds evoke the quiet—and perhaps sinister—nighttime atmosphere.

LINES 13-16

Ah, stern harsh world, that in the wretched way
Of poverty, dishonor and disgrace,
Has pushed the timid little feet of clay,
The sacred brown feet of my fallen race!

The speaker begins the final stanza with the word "Ah," expressing a sense of exasperation. This exasperation, it soon becomes clear, has to do with the speaker's feeling that the world is a "stern" and "harsh" place for young Black women like these sex workers.

Although the speaker previously personified the world as a being with a "white breast," the speaker now presents the world as malicious. The poem therefore takes on a darker, more pessimistic tone, as the speaker suggests that these women have been forced into their work by a relentlessly cruel society.

The world, the speaker indicates, is full of "poverty, dishonor and disgrace," and this is what has "pushed" these women into their difficult circumstances. The speaker's mention of "poverty" also hints at the fact that Black people have been economically disenfranchised throughout American history.

It also becomes apparent in this portion of the poem that the speaker is Black, since the speaker refers to the "sacred brown feet of my fallen race." The phrase "fallen race" is perhaps uncomfortable to modern readers, who might think the speaker is saying that the sex workers have brought "dishonor and disgrace" to all Black people. However, it seems more likely that the speaker is simply trying to highlight the extent to which the surrounding society has disempowered Black people.

In other words, the speaker doesn't think of Black people as a "fallen race" because of the way certain Black people behave, but because the rest of the world has (through racist oppression) made it extraordinarily difficult for Black people to achieve upward mobility. The speaker, then, doesn't cast judgment on the sex workers, but actually empathizes with their struggle to support themselves in this oppressive environment. This idea is supported by the fact that the speaker refers to their feet as "sacred," uplifting these young women as martyrs instead of blaming them for their own misfortune.

By this point in the poem, the women's feet have come to symbolize their resilience in the face of hardship. At the same time, the way the speaker talks about the sex workers' feet also emphasizes the juxtaposition between their vulnerability and the harsh nature of their lives. In line 15, the speaker describes their feet as "timid little feet of clay," presenting them as delicate, highly breakable pieces of pottery. This links the young women to the idea of fragility, once more making it seem as if they're vaguely child-like despite the mature lives they lead.

The speaker uses consonance of the /r/ sound quite prominently in lines 13 and 14:

> Ah, stern harsh world, that in the wretched way
> Of poverty, dishonor and disgrace

This repeated, growling /r/ sound increases the intensity of the speaker's language, giving the words a slight feeling of agitation or restlessness. The alliteration of the /d/ sound in the phrase "dishonor and disgrace" adds to this effect, giving the language a strong, thudding quality that makes the speaker sound assertive and forceful. This makes sense, considering that these lines are about how "harsh" the world can be.

LINES 17-18

Ah, heart of me, the weary, weary feet
In Harlem wandering from street to street.

The speaker once again begins a line with "Ah," again alerting readers to the speaker's frustration or exasperation. This time, though, the speaker focuses on empathizing with the women, saying, "Ah, heart of me, the weary, weary feet." In this context, the speaker's use of the word "Ah" underscores just how

strongly the speaker feels for these women.

The phrase "heart of me" suggests that these women are literally *part* of the speaker, vital to the speaker's ability to survive. This profound sense of empathy with the women aligns with the speaker's previous use of the phrase "my fallen race," suggesting that if one part of the Black community suffers, the *entire* community ends up suffering, too. Although the speaker isn't a sex worker, it's clear that watching these women overwork themselves just to survive is deeply upsetting. In other words, observing the women's misfortune reminds the speaker of the many hardships Black people face in America.

The speaker uses epizeuxis in line 17, saying, "Ah, heart of me, the weary, weary, feet." This calls attention to the word "weary," inviting readers to consider just how exhausting it must be for the women to stay out all night in such harsh conditions.

The poem then ends with what has become a refrain, as the speaker uses the phrase "from street to street" for the third time. Each of the three stanzas has ended with these same words, implying that the women are almost bound to these streets. With no other way of supporting themselves and nowhere else to go, they have no choice but to "wander[] from street to street," traversing Harlem just to survive.

The assonant long /ee/ sound makes these final two lines sound particularly musical:

> Ah, heart of me, the weary, weary feet
> In Harlem wandering from street to street.

This assonance makes the final words of the poem sound cohesive while also calling attention to the words "weary," "feet," and "street"—all important words, as the speaker underlines the exhaustion that these women feel on the streets of Harlem.

SYMBOLS

FEET

Feet in the poem represent the women's resilience. The women's feet, the speaker suggests, go "trudging, thinly shod, from street to street," as the women work all night in order to survive the cruel, harsh world in which they exist.

At the same time, the women's feet also reflect their vulnerability. Although the feet carry the women along as they go "prowling through the night," the speaker describes them as "slippered," "tired," "timid," and "little." All of these descriptions cast the feet as young, weary, or fragile, as if the women were sleepy little girls in pajamas.

The speaker therefore talks about the sex workers' feet in a contradictory way, indicating that the feet themselves are simultaneously resilient *and* vulnerable. This juxtaposition emphasizes the women's circumstances more broadly: they are disempowered and made vulnerable by a harsh world, yet they have no choice but to persevere.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "I hear the halting footsteps of a lass"
- **Lines 5-6:** "Ah, little dark girls who in slippered feet / Go prowling through the night from street to street!"
- **Line 8:** "the little gray feet know no rest;"
- **Lines 11-12:** "The dusky, half-clad girls of tired feet / Are trudging, thinly shod, from street to street."
- **Lines 15-16:** "the timid little feet of clay, / The sacred brown feet of my fallen race!"
- **Lines 17-18:** "the weary, weary feet / In Harlem wandering from street to street."

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

The poem begins with alliteration, as the speaker repeats the breathy /h/ sound in the first line:

> I hear the halting footsteps of a lass

This gives the poem's opening line a soft, breathy tone that almost makes it sound like the speaker is covertly whispering in a dark alley.

As the poem goes, the speaker's use of alliteration grows less gentle and soothing. Take lines 4 and 5, for example, when the speaker alliterates using the heavy /b/ and /d/ sounds:

> To bend and barter at desire's call.
> Ah, little dark girls who in slippered feet

This blunter alliteration makes the speaker's language feel more forceful. The percussive solidity of the /b/ and /d/ sounds also calls attention to the words "bend," "barter," "desire," and "dark," inviting readers to envision these women stooping to speak to potential clients who sit in cars and seem to embody lust itself.

The speaker also uses alliteration to add intensity to passionate moments. This is the case in lines 13 and 14, when the speaker alliterates the /w/ and /d/ sounds while lamenting the world's cruelty:

> Ah, stern harsh world, that in the wretched way
> Of poverty, dishonor and disgrace

The repetition of the /w/ and /d/ sounds once again adds a

certain rhythm to the poem, making it feel musical and melodic while also giving it a slightly forceful edge. The thudding rhythm created by the /d/ sound in the phrase "dishonor and disgrace" is particularly striking, giving the line a strong pulse that adds power to the speaker's overall tone. Alliteration, then, helps the speaker convey a sense of frustration.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "hear," "halting"
- **Line 2:** "Negro," "Harlem," "night"
- **Line 4:** "bend," "barter," "desire's"
- **Line 5:** "dark"
- **Line 7:** "Through the"
- **Line 8:** "know no"
- **Line 9:** "Through the," "lone," "last," "flake"
- **Line 10:** "Has," "from," "heaven"
- **Line 11:** "tired"
- **Line 12:** "trudging," "street"
- **Line 13:** "stern," "world," "way"
- **Line 14:** "poverty," "dishonor," "disgrace"
- **Line 15:** "pushed"
- **Line 16:** "feet," "fallen"
- **Line 17:** "heart," "weary," "feet"
- **Line 18:** "Harlem," "wandering," "from"

REPETITION

"Harlem Shadows" is full of repetition, as the speaker emphasizes important words and uses similar sentence construction to create parallelism between each stanza. The most obvious example of this is the repetition that occurs at the end of each stanza. For example, the last two lines of the first stanza look like this:

> Ah, little dark girls who in slippered feet
> Go prowling through the night from street to street!

While the second stanza ends like this:

> The dusky, half-clad girls of tired feet
> Are trudging, thinly shod, from street to street.

And the final stanza ends like this:

> Ah, heart of me, the weary, weary feet
> In Harlem wandering from street to street.

The last two lines of every stanza thus feature the same exact rhyme, which occurs between the words "feet" and "street." In each case, the speaker encourages readers to focus on the women's feet, which represent the juxtaposition between their fragility and resiliency (more on this in the "Symbols" section of this guide). The repetition of "from street to street" also firmly plants readers in the harsh environment in which these young women live, making it impossible to forget that they are forced to work on the unforgiving streets of Harlem at night.

The speaker also uses anaphora to emphasize that the young women must stay out in harsh conditions all night. In the second stanza, for example, lines 7 and 9 parallel each other:

> Through the long night until the silver break
> Of day the little gray feet know no rest;
> Through the lone night until the last snow-flake

The repetition of the words "through the [...] night until" underline that the sex workers "know no rest" as they diligently work to support themselves. This anaphora also enhances the rhythm and flow of the poem, giving the language a consistent and cohesive feeling that draws readers through the lines.

The speaker repeats individual words throughout the poem as well. This happens in line 17, for example, when the speaker uses epizeuxis in the phrase "the weary, weary feet." By repeating the word "weary" twice in a row, the speaker highlights the sex workers' exhaustion. Other instances of single-word repetitions are spread throughout the poem, like the speaker's frequent use of the word "little," which appears once in each stanza. The word "Ah" also surfaces several times, creating a subtle anaphora when the speaker uses it in the final stanza to begin two consecutive sentences (lines 13 and 17).

Lastly, the speaker uses the word "girls" multiple times, encouraging readers to see these young women as children who have been forced to grow up too fast. By repeating the word "girls" instead of "women," the speaker emphasizes the juxtaposition between the women's vulnerability and the nature of their jobs.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "girls"
- **Line 5:** "Ah," "little," "girls," "feet"
- **Line 6:** "from street to street"
- **Line 7:** "Through the long night until the"
- **Line 8:** "little," "feet"
- **Line 9:** "Through the lone night until the"
- **Line 11:** "girls," "feet"
- **Line 12:** "from street to street"
- **Line 13:** "Ah"
- **Line 15:** "little," "feet"
- **Line 16:** "feet"
- **Line 17:** "Ah," "weary, weary," "feet"
- **Line 18:** "from street to street"

SIBILANCE

"Harlem Shadows" is filled with sibilance that evokes the dark streets of Harlem at night. Take the first four lines, for example,

which are filled with both /s/ and /z/ sounds (the latter of which adds to the sibilance, and is often considered sibilant itself):

> I hear the halting footsteps of a lass
> In Negro Harlem when the night lets fall
> Its veil. I see the shapes of girls who pass
> To bend and barer at desire's call.

The hissing sibilance establishes an atmosphere of quiet tension, while the /z/ sound in "desire's" adds a gentle buzzing quality that is perhaps lulling and appealing. In this way, sibilance creates the feeling of covertly glimpsing a part of Harlem that is usually unseen or overlooked.

The hiss of sibilance can also suggest something sinister. In the poem's final stanza, the sibilance does just that—evoking the "stern harsh world" in which these girls work. Then, in lines 14 to 16, the soft /s/ sounds are joined by similarly hushed /f/ sounds:

> Of poverty, dishonor and disgrace,
> Has pushed the timid little feet of clay,
> The sacred brown feet of my fallen race!

The hush created by these sounds suggests the whispered, secret nature of the girls' work.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "footsteps," "lass"
- **Line 2:** "lets"
- **Line 3:** "Its," "see," "shapes," "girls," "pass"
- **Line 4:** "desire's"
- **Line 5:** "girls," "slippered"
- **Line 6:** "street," "street"
- **Line 12:** "shod," "street," "street"
- **Line 13:** "stern," "harsh"
- **Line 14:** "dishonor," "disgrace"
- **Line 15:** "Has," "pushed"
- **Line 16:** "sacred," "race"
- **Line 18:** "street," "street"

IMAGERY

The poem draws upon visual and auditory imagery to vividly evoke Harlem at night for the reader. In the first line, for example, the speaker talks about the sound of "halting footsteps" that come from a young woman as she walks down the street. By describing the sound of her footsteps in this way, the speaker hints at this unknown woman's emotional state, since the word "halting" suggests a certain feeling of hesitancy or cautiousness. Readers can almost hear her footsteps clicking uncertainly on the hard concrete.

When the speaker goes on to visually describe the surrounding landscape, it becomes clear why this woman would exercise caution—she is, after all, walking on a dark city street, as made clear by the speaker's assertion that "night lets fall / Its veil." This phrase invites readers to envision the city as a place that has been cloaked in complete darkness.

As the speaker's eyes begin to adjust, it becomes easier to see beyond the "veil" shrouding the Harlem streets. There are, readers learn, multiple other young women, since the speaker says, "I see the shapes of girls who pass." The dim streets therefore begin to take on a new quality, as readers sense that this place is buzzing with life even though it's not initially clear that it's so full of activity.

In the second stanza, the speaker uses imagery to call attention to just how long the women have to remain on the streets, saying that they continue to work "through the long night until the silver break / Of day." Whereas the beginning of the poem focuses on describing the utter darkness of the streets, this stanza describes the weak morning light that filters into the scene after the young women have worked themselves to utter exhaustion. To add to this, the speaker implies that it snows all night, once more drawing upon the human senses to more thoroughly entrench readers in the world of the poem.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "I hear the halting footsteps of a lass"
- **Lines 2-3:** "when the night lets fall / Its veil"
- **Line 3:** "I see the shapes of girls who pass"
- **Lines 7-8:** "Through the long night until the silver break / Of day"
- **Lines 9-10:** "Through the lone night until the last snow-flake / Has dropped from heaven upon the earth's white breast"
- **Line 11:** "The dusky, half-clad girls"

PERSONIFICATION

The speaker uses personification in "Harlem Shadows" to make the environment feel vibrant and alive. When the speaker says that "night lets fall / Its veil," for instance, the night itself takes on a certain mysteriousness, as if it has intentionally thrown the world into darkness so that socially unacceptable activities can take place in secret on the Harlem streets. This makes the surroundings feel exciting and thrillingly illicit, as if the speaker has given readers access to an unseen (or at least overlooked) world.

The speaker also personifies desire itself instead of talking explicitly about the men who pay to have sex with these women. The phrase "desire's call" presents lust as something that actively calls out to the women. The idea that they "barter" with desire also implies that they're able to leverage their sexual appeal to their own advantage, but the notion that they "bend" to desire also intimates that—despite their small

amount of sexual empowerment—they ultimately have no choice but to submit to these lustful men (likely because they have no other ways of supporting themselves). The choice to personify desire heightens this dilemma, giving readers the sense that lust is a powerful force—one that leads the men who pay for sex to feel entitled to the sex workers' bodies.

In the second and third stanzas, the speaker personifies the earth. The first example of this appears in line 10, when the speaker describes snow falling on the "earth's white breast." This description depicts the earth as either some kind of animal or as a human with breasts. Either way, the phrase presents the world as a living thing, once more making the surroundings feel dynamic and animated.

In the third stanza, however, the speaker personifies the earth in a much different way. Whereas in the second stanza the speaker makes the earth seem like a gentle, perhaps nourishing creature, now the speaker suggests that the world is "stern" and "harsh." This helps the speaker subtly imply that the young women have been forced into sex work out of necessity, since the environment in which they live is cruel and has made it impossible for them to support themselves any other way. Personification, then, allows the speaker to address the conditions that have disempowered these Black women while also simply bringing the poem to life.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "when the night lets fall / Its veil"
- **Line 4:** "To bend and barter at desire's call"
- **Line 10:** "the earth's white breast"
- **Lines 13-15:** "Ah, stern harsh world, that in the wretched way / Of poverty, dishonor and disgrace, / Has pushed the timid little feet of clay"

CONSONANCE

"Harlem Shadows" is packed with consonance. For example, line 4 contains strong /b/ and /d/ sounds:

> To bend and barter at desire's call

The language here is rhythmic and forceful. The words "bend," "barter," and "desire" stand out in particular, spotlighting the image of young women stooping to speak to men in cars who want to pay them for sex.

Consonance also can evoke the poem's imagery. In lines 10 and 11, for example, the forceful /d/, /k/, /r/, and /t/ sounds slow the lines down. These lines feel thick and heavy with sound, reflecting the way the exhausted women must "trudge" through the night:

> The dusky, half-clad girls of tired feet
> Are trudging [...]

The growling /r/ returns as consonance, alongside more /d/ and /s/ sounds, in lines 13-14:

> Ah, stern harsh world, that in the wretched way
> Of poverty, dishonor and disgrace,

The back-of-the-throat /r/ sound combined with that spitting /s/ and thudding /d/ seems to evoke the speaker's disdain for the cruelty of the world at hand. By contrast, note how light and lilting the /t/ sounds feel in "timid little feet," suggesting the comparative fragility of the women confronting this dreadful world.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "hear," "halting," "footsteps," "lass"
- **Line 2:** "Harlem," "lets fall"
- **Line 3:** "veil"
- **Line 4:** "bend," "barter," "desire's"
- **Line 5:** "little," "dark," "girls," "slippered"
- **Line 6:** "prowling," "through," "night," "street," "to," "street"
- **Line 8:** "know no"
- **Line 9:** "lone," "night," "until," "last," "snow," "flake"
- **Line 10:** "dropped," "upon," "breast"
- **Line 11:** "dusky," "half," "clad," "tired," "feet"
- **Line 12:** "Are," "trudging," "street," "to," "street"
- **Line 13:** "stern," "harsh," "world," "wretched"
- **Line 14:** "poverty," "dishonor," "and," "disgrace"
- **Line 15:** "pushed," "timid," "little," "feet," "clay"
- **Line 16:** "sacred," "brown," "feet," "fallen," "race"
- **Line 17:** "heart," "weary," "feet"
- **Line 18:** "Harlem," "wandering," "street," "to," "street"

ASSONANCE

The speaker uses assonance in certain moments of the poem to make the language sound melodic. It can also evoke the poem's imagery, as is the case with the flittering short /i/ sounds in "little dark girls who in slippered feet." Those quick vowel sounds, paired with gentle /l/ consonance, evoke the women's vulnerability.

Later, the second stanza features clear assonance of the short /i/ and the long /ay/ sound in lines 7 and 8:

> Through the long night until the silver break
> Of day the little gray feet know no rest

The short /i/ sound appears twice in quick succession in the phrase "until the silver," giving this moment a quick boost of musicality. The long /ay/ sound in the words "break" and "day" further adds to the melodic nature of the section, making the speaker's language sound song-like and cohesive.

The speaker uses the /i/ and /ay/ sounds once again in lines 15 and 16 look like this:

Has pushed the timid little feet of clay,
The sacred brown feet of my fallen race

The phrase "timid little" sounds particularly rhythmic because of the repetition of the short /i/ again sound. This recalls the first stanza's description of these women, with that flittering /i/ sound suggesting their vulnerability. Whereas this /i/ sound feels clipped and short, the /ay/ sound in "clay" and "sacred" feels long and extended, as if the words are stretching out. This gives these lines a push-and-pull effect that keeps the rhythm and general sonic quality of the language fresh and interesting.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "little," "in," "slippered"
- **Line 7:** "until," "silver," "break"
- **Line 8:** "day," "little," "gray," "know no"
- **Line 9:** "lone," "snow"
- **Line 10:** "heaven," "breast"
- **Line 11:** "dusky," "half-clad"
- **Line 12:** "trudging," "thinly"
- **Line 15:** "timid little," "clay"
- **Line 16:** "sacred," "race"
- **Line 17:** "me," "weary," "weary," "feet"

JUXTAPOSITION

Juxtaposition is central to "Harlem Shadows," since the speaker highlights the contrast between the sex workers' vulnerability and the harsh reality of their job. Although the sex workers are forced to "bend and barter at desire's call," the speaker talks about them as if they're mere children. The speaker specifically calls them "little [...] girls," going on to talk about their "slippered feet." This leads to the image of small children in slippers and pajamas—an image that is very much at odds with the fact that these women are sex workers who the speaker says go "prowling through the night."

The pleasant and peaceful imagery the speaker uses to describe the surrounding world also feels out of place in a poem about sex workers doing whatever they can to survive on dark city streets. The beautiful and pleasant sight of a snowflake gently settling on the "earth's white breast" clashes with the speaker's assertion in the very next line that the sex workers are "half-clad" and exhausted as they make their way through this harsh, cold environment.

There is also a stark juxtaposition between the speaker's description of the world in the second stanza and the subsequent description of the world in the final stanza. Whereas at first the world is linked to serene, snow-related imagery, the speaker eventually says that it is "stern" and "harsh." Although something might *seem* pleasant and beautiful, the poem implies, it's always possible that it's actually cruel and unforgiving. This is certainly the case for the sex workers, whom the wicked world has "pushed" into an incredibly difficult way of life. Put another way, the speaker's use of juxtaposition helps unveil the discrepancy between the seemingly beautiful world and the deep, harrowing hardship that young Black Americans experience—hardship that is often overlooked by the rest of society.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- Lines 5-6
- Lines 9-12
- Lines 13-16

ENJAMBMENT

The speaker uses enjambment throughout "Harlem Shadows" to create momentum and anticipation in the poem. Take the opening stanza, which flows from one line to the next without pausing:

I hear the halting footsteps of a lass
In Negro Harlem when the night lets fall
Its veil. [...]

The use of enjambment whisks readers through the poem, making the lines sound smooth and uninterrupted. The poem feels like it's tumbling forward, especially when the speaker ends the second line with the word "fall," making readers feel drawn forward into the next line.

The speaker's use of enjambment doesn't just smooth out the pace and flow, but also spotlights the poem's rhyme scheme. Consider, for example, lines 7 through 10:

Through the long night until the silver break
Of day the little gray feet know no rest;
Through the lone night until the last snow-flake
Has dropped from heaven upon the earth's white
breast

When the speaker ends line 10 on the word "snow-flake," the poem seems to dangle for a moment, since the phrase remains incomplete. The speaker breaks the line here in part because it allows for a rhyme between "flake" at the end of line 9 (which is enjambed for the same reason—to rhyme with "break").

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "lass / In"
- **Lines 2-3:** "fall / Its"
- **Lines 3-4:** "pass / To"
- **Lines 5-6:** "feet / Go"
- **Lines 7-8:** "break / Of"
- **Lines 9-10:** "snow-flake / Has"
- **Lines 11-12:** "feet / Are"

- **Lines 13-14:** "way / Of"
- **Lines 14-15:** "disgrace, / Has"
- **Lines 17-18:** "feet / In"

VOCABULARY

Halting (Line 1) - Slow, uneven, and hesitant.

Lass (Line 1) - A young woman.

Veil (Line 3) - A piece of thin material used to conceal or cover a person's face.

Barter (Line 4) - To "barter" is to negotiate a trade or exchange of some sort.

Prowling (Line 6) - To "prowl" is to hunt or scavenge while moving stealthily.

Lone (Line 9) - In this context, the word "lone" is used to describe a remote or empty place.

Dusky (Line 11) - A description of a dark color. An antiquated term, the word "dusky" was often used to describe Black people. Such use is now considered dated and inappropriate.

Half-clad (Line 11) - Partially clothed. The speaker means that the women are in clothes that don't fully cover their bodies—leaving them exposed to the cold and, of course, the eyes of potential clients.

Shod (Line 12) - The phrase "thinly shod" suggests that the women are wearing thin or worn-out shoes.

Wretched (Line 13) - Terrible, cruel, and wicked.

Weary (Line 17) - Tired.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Harlem Shadows" is an 18-line poem organized into three sestets (six-line stanzas). Each of the stanzas ends with a refrain of sorts, as the speaker repeats the phrase "from street to street." The second-to-last line of each stanza also ends with the same word: "feet." These repetitions give the poem a predictable quality while simultaneously enhancing its musicality, making it sound song-like.

The appearance of the word "feet" in each stanza also spotlights one of the poem's most important images (for more on this, see the "Symbols" section of this guide). The repeated mention of the streets, on the other hand, repeatedly calls attention to the poem's dark, rather dangerous setting. In this way, the structure of the poem helps the speaker spotlight some of its most important symbols and ideas.

METER

"Harlem Shadows" is written in iambic pentameter. This means that its lines consist of five iambs—metrical feet made up of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable. Consider, for example, line 6:

> Go prow- | ling through | the night | from street | to street!

This line features the classic da-DUM da-DUM bounce created by iambic pentameter. The repetition in the phrase "from street to street" further emphasizes this rhythm, intensifying the accented syllables of the line's last two iambs. In addition to giving the poem a pleasant, musical sound, this beat also subtly recalls the sound of footsteps, making it that much easier for readers to imagine hearing the women as they walk through the dark streets.

There are, however, a number of metrical substitutions throughout the poem. Line 7, for instance, scans like this:

> Through the | long night | until | the sil- | ver break

The first foot of this line is a trochee, meaning that it contains a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable: "Through the." This inverts the standard iambic rhythm, emphasizing the idea that the sex workers have to make it all the way "through" the night. What's more, the second foot is a spondee, meaning that it's made up of two consecutive stressed syllables: "long night." This calls even more attention to the fact that the sex workers have to spend the entirety of the night on the cold, harsh city streets in order to survive.

RHYME SCHEME

Each stanza of "Harlem Shadows" follows the same rhyme scheme:

ABABCC

The poem feels musical and cohesive, its sounds relatively predictable and upbeat despite the poem's subject. This, in turn, subtly suggests that this is a well-worn tune, that the speaker is not highlighting a new problem but rather one that has gone on for a while. The speaker seems used to talking about such upsetting things—an indication that society's relentless disempowerment of the Black community is nothing the speaker hasn't experienced or witnessed before.

SPEAKER

The speaker is implied to be a Black person living (or at least spending time) in Harlem. The speaker makes it clear throughout the poem that the women in question are Black, and then refers to "The sacred brown feet of my fallen race!"

The word "my" suggests that, like the sex workers themselves, the speaker is Black, and that this is a person concerned with the well-being of other Black Americans.

Some readers will perhaps argue that the speaker is Claude McKay himself, since McKay was a Black man who spent time in Harlem as a young man. Regardless of whether McKay is the speaker, though, another thing that's clear is that this person doesn't view sex work favorably. Instead, the speaker thinks sex work is dangerous and difficult profession. The speaker doesn't criticize the women themselves, but rather laments the conditions that have forced them into such work in the first place.

SETTING

The poem takes place at night in Harlem, a predominantly Black neighborhood in New York City. Although the speaker never mentions the year, it seems likely that it's set in the early 1920s, when McKay wrote the poem. This ties the poem to the Harlem Renaissance, a period in the 1920s during which Black arts and culture flourished in Harlem.

The fact that the poem takes place at night also reflects the sordid nature of sex work at the time of its publication, and invites readers to consider the racial dynamics at work here as well. The poem implies that men only come to this section of Harlem under the cover of darkness, when they can pay to sleep with women they might otherwise avoid. The poem thus functions as a furtive glimpse at a section of Harlem that has been overlooked by the rest of society.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"Harlem Shadows" was published in Claude McKay's 1922 poetry collection of the same name. The book is widely considered to be one of the first publications of the Harlem Renaissance, a Black artistic and cultural movement that began in New York City. As one of the first influential books of this movement, *Harlem Shadows* is often discussed alongside the works of other writers associated with the Harlem Renaissance—writers like Langston Hughes, Alain Locke, and Zora Neale Hurston, among others.

Although not all of the art that emerged from the Harlem Renaissance dealt explicitly with race or racism, these were often central themes or concerns. This was the case with much of McKay's poetry. McKay was inspired in part by the work of Black intellectuals like W. E. B. Du Bois, who famously wrote about the experience of being Black in the United States. This resonated with McKay, who actually came to the United States from Jamaica as a young man and was shaken by the racism he encountered in both Kingston and in places like South Carolina, Alabama, and even New York City.

While other Harlem Renaissance poets like Langston Hughes departed from the formal and stylistic conventions of European poetry in order to set forth a tone that they felt was more authentic to the Black experience, McKay fused the traditions of European poetry with his own perspective on the world. This stylistic choice is clear in "Harlem Shadows," which uses iambic pentameter and a strict rhyme scheme to describe a group of Black women working as sex workers in Harlem. Although most of McKay's contemporaries in the Harlem Renaissance abandoned such formal conventions, McKay embraced them, using somewhat dated poetic forms to explore more modern and culturally relevant topics.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The poem was written during the Harlem Renaissance, which began to take root as early as 1918. The Harlem Renaissance was largely seen as a flourishing of Black American arts and culture, though it also influenced many Black French artists. This came at a time when the United States was enjoying prosperity and stability. World War I had ended in 1918, and the 1920s soon came to be known as the "Roaring Twenties" because of the wealth and opulence that defined the decade.

This prosperity, however, didn't necessarily extend to Black Americans, who continued to grapple with poverty and oppression. Racist Jim Crow policies were still in effect as well, with segregation dividing the country and making it difficult, if not outright impossible, for Black people to benefit from the same resources as white people. For example, schools were still racially segregated at the time, and Black schools were largely overlooked and underfunded. This meant that the quality of education in the United States for the average Black child was worse than it was for the average white child, making it even more difficult for Black people to secure well-paying jobs as adults.

In short, systemic racism disempowered Black Americans and made it extraordinarily hard for them to attain financial stability or upward mobility, despite the prosperity that otherwise took hold of the United States during the so-called "Roaring Twenties." McKay engages with this dilemma in "Harlem Shadows" by drawing attention to the fact that the Black women at the center of the poem have no choice but to survive by selling their bodies. And this, it's clear, is because they live in a society that has cut off the majority of resources and opportunities for Black people.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Hear the Poem Out Loud — Listen to a reading of "Harlem

Shadows." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7f7verfIJew)

- More About Claude McKay — To learn more about Claude McKay, take a look at this overview of his life and work. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/claude-mckay)
- The Harlem Renaissance — This introduction to the Harlem Renaissance includes a summary of the movement and a collection of the poems that defined it. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/145704/an-introduction-to-the-harlem-renaissance)
- McKay Reads His Work Aloud — Listen to Claude McKay read several of his other well-known poems, including "If We Must Die." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L_xpilVoWuo)
- Electronic Version of Harlem Shadows — You can read the other poems in Harlem Shadows in this digitized collection, which assembles the poems in the same order as the book's original publication. (https://scalar.lehigh.edu/mckay/harlem-shadows--digital-edition)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER CLAUDE MCKAY POEMS

- If We Must Die

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