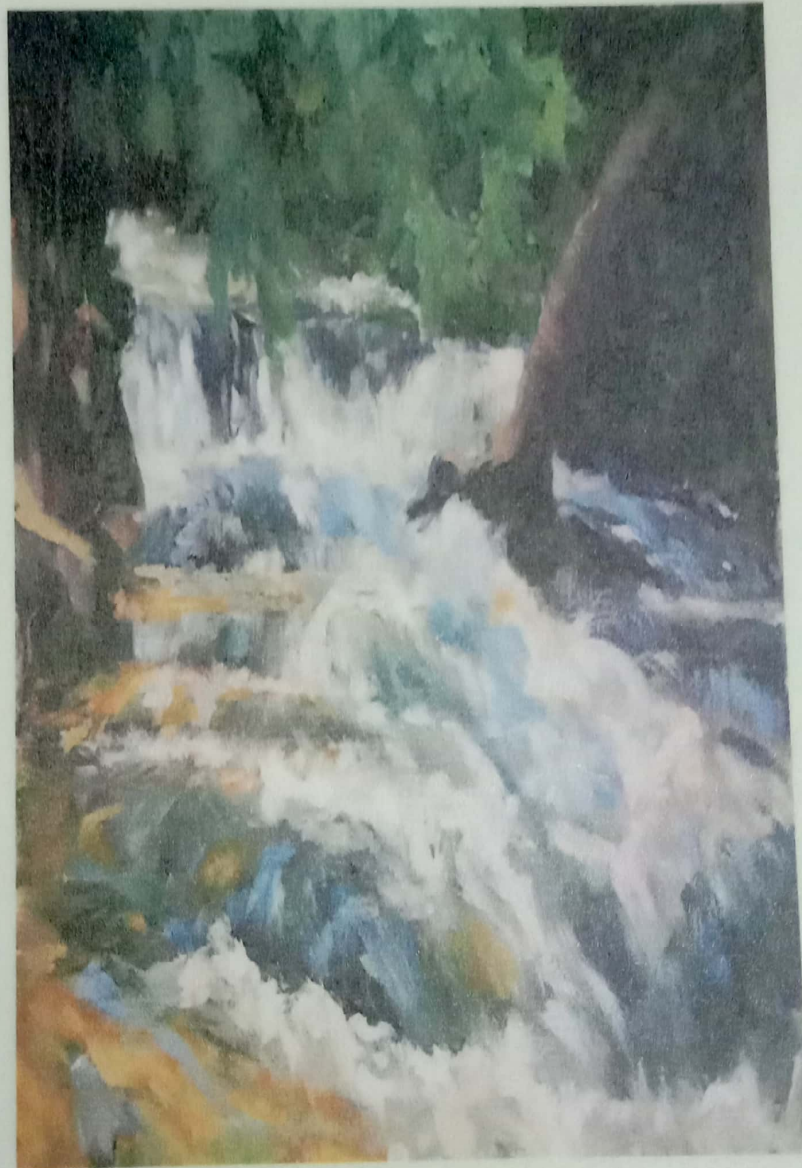


# *ECHOING CASCADES*

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# MCKAY'S POEMS: A MASSIVE OUTBREAK TO HARLEM RENAISSANCE

J.SHARMILA

## Introduction

Claude McKay was a poet who flourished during the Harlem renaissance, a major literary movement in the 1920s. During this time, McKay's poems challenged white authority while celebrating Jamaican culture. He wrote about the trials and tribulations of life as a black man in both Jamaica and America. McKay was not secretive about his hatred for racism and felt that racist people were stupid and could not look past their shortsightedness and hatred.

## The Harlem Renaissance

The Harlem renaissance was an African-American awakening on literature, music, art and more. It went on from 1918-37 and had a huge impact on America. It began with the migration of the African Americans and risen levels of education. It was influenced by not only African culture, but American or "white" culture as well. Poetry was being used in many new ways and forms by African Americans. Writers like Hughes and Countee Cullen created distinct poetry, revolutionizing it during this time. Along with poetry, the Harlem Renaissance touched upon novels and stories. It captivated the modern life and diversity of black culture and experiences. Blacks were proving their work was just better than the white's. Black literature raised against racism and went beyond class, ethnicities, and gender. Writers, such as Claude McKay and Zora Hurston, created an impact on the renaissance, leaving footprints that people would be noticing for many more years to come. Literature at this time was an enormous impact on not only black culture, but getting closer to the equality they hoped for.

## McKay, a part in Harlem Renaissance

Claude McKay was a Jamaican-American poet best known for his radical sonnet "*If We Must Die*," the most militant poem of the Harlem



Renaissance. He was recognised as the artistic counterpart to Marcus Garvey.

Festus Claudius McKay was born in Sunny Ville, Clarendon in Jamaica, on September 15, 1890. His mother and father spoke proudly of their respective Malagasy and Ashanti heritage, and infused him with racial pride and a great sense of his African heritage. Under the tutelage of his brother, schoolteacher Uriah Theophilus McKay, and a neighboring Englishman, Walter Jekyll, McKay studied poetry and philosophy. It was Jekyll, who encouraged him to write in his native Jamaican dialect, and to cease mimicking the English poets.

At age seventeen McKay departed from Sunny Ville to apprentice as a woodworker in Brown's Town. But he studied there only briefly before leaving to work as a constable in the Jamaican capital, Kingston. There, he experienced and encountered extensive racism, probably for the first time in his life. His native Sunny Ville was predominantly populated by blacks, but in Kingston blacks were considered inferior and capable of only menial tasks. McKay quickly grew disgusted with the city's bigoted society, and within one year he returned home to Sunny Ville.

During his brief stays in Brown's Town and Kingston, McKay continued writing poetry, blending his African pride with his love of English poetry. Once back in Sunny Ville, with Jekyll's encouragement, he published his first two collections of poems, "*Songs of Jamaica*" and "*Constab Ballads*". For "*Songs of Jamaica*", McKay received an award and stipend from the Jamaican Institute of Arts and Sciences. His period in Kansas coincided with a highly-active period of the Ku Klux Klan, leading McKay to move to New York in 1914, settling in Harlem.

As in Kingston, McKay encountered racism in New York City, and that racism compelled him to continue writing poetry. McKay became active in radical politics and published his next poems in 1917 under the pseudonym Eli Edwards, in the periodical "*Seven Arts*". His verses were discovered by critic Frank Hattis, who then included some of McKay's other poems in *Pearson's Magazine*. Among McKay's most famous



poems from this period is "To the White Fiends," a vitriolic challenge to white oppressors and bigots. A few years later McKay befriended Max Eastman, communist sympathizer and editor of the magazine *Liberator*, which published McKay's best-known piece of work, "If We Must Die".

### **McKay's best-known work**

"If We Must Die" was written amid the violence and bloodshed that swept America during the 1919, which came to be known as "The Red Summer". With his sonnet, McKay encourages his community to take action and to fight back. It was essentially a call-to-arm, advocating militant action in defending black lives and communities. After its original publication in the July 1919 edition of the "*Liberator*" magazine, "If We Must Die" was published in political advocate Cyril Briggs' (1888-1966) *Crusader* magazine. He assured his stature as a leading member of the literary movement referred to as the Harlem Renaissance. He capitalized on his acclaim by redoubling his efforts on behalf of blacks and labourers.

### **The massive impact in McKay's poems**

Poetry is an incredible art form in its capability to express all emotion eloquently. There is something about a well-thought-out verse structure that can make any sequence of words sound beautiful, powerful, daunting, or anything else that might be expressed. McKay identified Euro-Americans for what they were, a "murderous, cowardly pack" and demanded from African-Americans, courage in dealing with oppression and victimization. The following poems exploded through the American psyche, and had a powerful impact.

### **If We Must Die**

Ironically constructed in the form of a Shakespearean love sonnet, "If We Must Die" is a political protest against racial oppression. Stimulated by a series of violent and blood racial conflicts producing rioting and police brutality, "If We Must Die" defiantly urges oppressed blacks to stand up and fight back against white oppressors.

If we must die, O let us nobly die, So that our precious blood may not  
be shed In vain; then even the monsters we defy Shall be constrained  
to honor us though dead!

“If We Must Die” (lines 5- 8)

Beneath the call for rebellion is a reminder of the cherished values  
of insurrection in America against those that would deny freedom and  
undermine one's self-respect.

### **America**

McKay was still crafting protest poetry late in his life, but  
“America” is tempered with the realizations that come with time. It is a  
ferocious assault against his adopted country for the many ways it which  
systematically organizes to dehumanize an entire race.

Although she feeds me bread of bitterness, And sinks into my throat  
her tiger's tooth, Stealing my breath of life, I will confess  
I love this cultured hell that tests my youth!

“America” (lines 1- 4)

At the same time, however, this oppression also serves to harden  
his soul and strengthen his resolve to overcome his oppressors.

### **Enslaved**

“Enslaved” by Claude McKay is an example of such a poem, one  
that turns bitterness, hatred, and rage into an eloquent art form that can  
anyone can read and wonder at.

Oh when I think of my long-suffering race, For weary centuries  
despised, oppressed, Enslaved and lynched, denied a human place  
In the great life line of the Christian West;

“Enslaved” (lines 1- 4)



Today, it serves as a window into the mind of one of the unfortunate segregated, oppressed, and crushed spirits that haunted McKay's life, in Jamaica, the United States, and England.

### **Courage**

There is something very barren about the start of the poem. 'Unyielding earth' and 'bare rocks' paints a landscape very bleak.

There is no part of the unyielding earth, Even bare rocks where  
the eagles build their nest, Will give us undisturbed and friendly  
rest. No dewfall softens this vast belt of dearth.

"Courage" (lines 9- 12)

It describes the emptiness he feels. He is devoid and lifeless as a result of not receiving the love that he wants.

### **A Memory of June**

The poem itself is a confessional of what the McKay feels about the month of June itself. He simply describes the emotions, feelings, and images that come to mind when he thinks of the month of June.

When June comes dancing o'er the death of May, With scarlet roses  
staining her fair feet, My soul takes leave of me to sing all day  
A love so fugitive and so complete.

"A memory of June" (lines 17- 20)

He seems to believe that the month of June is a type of rebirth which relates blacks because he talks about the death of May.

### **Birds of Prey**

Birds sing and soar in many of the poems collected in Claude McKay's "Harlem Shadows". However, birds express much more than the beauty of nature in Harlem Shadows. Here, birds serve as symbols of capitalist greed and violence. He incorporates birds into an expression of his anti-capitalist, anti-racist politics.



They scare the singing birds of earth away As, greed-impelled,  
they circle threateningly. Watching the toilers with malignant eye,  
From their exclusive haven--birds of prey.

"Birds of Prey" (lines 5-8)

The prevalence of birds in poems concerned with McKay's emigration  
from Jamaica to the United States.

### **Flame Heart**

"Flame Heart" is another of McKay's most well-known poems and  
stands out among all the protest and politics as a reflection upon being ten  
years removed from Jamaica. The yearning for innocence of youth is  
combined with the realization of how much one forgets when one is away  
from home.

Oh some I know! I have embalmed the days, Even the sacred  
moments when we played, All innocent of passion, uncorrupt,  
At noon and evening in the flame-heart's shade.

"Flame Heart" (lines 25- 28)

It is a lyrical tribute to both to the past and the way that memory impacts  
the reality of that past.

### **His last days**

McKay wrote three novels "*Home to Harlem*",  
"*Banjo*" and "*Banana Bottom*". Returning to Harlem, he began work on  
an autobiography entitled "*A Long Way from Home*", which focuses on  
his experiences of oppression as a black individual in a white society.  
McKay went through several changes toward the end of his life. He  
embraced Catholicism, retreating from Communism entirely, and  
officially became an American citizen in 1940. His experiences working  
with Catholic relief organizations in New York inspired a new essay  
collection, "*Harlem: Negro Metropolis*", which offers observations and  
analysis of the African-American community in Harlem during the 1920s

and 1930s. He endured several illnesses throughout his last years and eventually died of heart failure on May 22, 1948.

### **Conclusion**

Many years after his death, McKay, the hero of the Harlem renaissance continues to be admired for his intense commitment of expressing the predicament of Black people and for devoting his art and life to social protest.

“You prepare a banquet for me, where all my enemies can see me; you welcome me as an honoured guest and fill my cup to the brim.”  
Psalms 23: 5

The fact is, the blacks are not fighting for survival and race; they already know they will die. They will fight honorably so that their death will not be meaningless, and so that, maybe, their enemy will honor them as the Bible says.

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