Claude McKay: A Literary Revolutionary

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By Rikki Vargas

Claude McKay was a Jamaican-American writer who produced works that served as a catalyst for the Harlem Renaissance. McKay's works consist of themes that tie back to the experiences Black literature rose from, such as slavery, racism, and segregation. McKay's "America" presents these themes through shifting imagery, hopeful thematic transition, conscious duality, and his renowned sonnet tradition, illuminating the complex interrelationship of art and politics, while advocating for the Black experience in the United States. McKay's poetry substantiates his artistry while bettering the Black community and sustaining American humanity, highlighted especially in his iconic poem "America."

Background & Temperament

Born and raised in Jamaica, Claude McKay was introduced to his ancestral African roots through his father's stories of his grandfather's Ashanti customs and his mother's Malagasy lineage. Both of his parents were peasant farmers and Baptist leaders in their local church. They also had sufficient property rights for suffrage. McKay's prominence as a Black writer and poet can be traced back to his familial and cultural background. Furthermore, his avid interest in British literature and mentorship with Walter Jekyll—in combination with his native Jamaican background—spawned McKay's distinctive perspective in his American expression of the Black experience through the connection of art and politics.

Jamaica to America

At age four, McKay began basic schooling at the church he attended. Three years later, he was sent to live with his oldest brother, who educated him in classical literature, philosophy, science, and theology. He started writing poetry at 10 years old. McKay's proficiency in literature was bolstered by Walter Jekyll, a man who became a mentor and inspiration. He ended up helping McKay publish his first book of poems, Songs of Jamaica, in 1912. McKay's early works revealed "a poet whose social and educational experience were rooted in the less brutal British colonialism of his native island" (Denizé and Newlin 102). It was not until McKay left for America in that same year that he experienced a shift in literary content and poetic themes.

McKay's colonial experience of Jamaica carried analogies to the Black effort and reaction of African Americans to the dominant, racist American discourse. In some ways, the fight against the British Empire bore similarities with the historical and social resistance of African Americans, producing a unique literary mode of thought in the 1920s Harlem context—an extension of the postcolonial attitude with writers such as McKay, Walrond, and Holstein. This quality of the Harlem Renaissance that rose from West Indian writers, authors, and poets gave "an international perspective and a geographically distanced locus of the ruling discourse" (Philipson 146). Furthermore, this distinct perspective emerged from the immigrant's spatial shock from a colonial realm to America's complex racial scheme.

Attending Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute in the South, McKay was particularly appalled by the vast contrast of American prejudice from societal conditions in Jamaica. He asserted that "[t]he whites at home constitute about 14% of the population only and they generally conform to the standard of English respectability" (McKay, "Passion" 48). His entrance to an environment where he was the minority instead of the majority prompted him, in 1918, to write:

I had heard of prejudice in America but never dreamed of it being so intensely bitter; for at home there is also prejudice of the English sort, subtle and dignified, rooted in class distinction—color and race being hardly taken into account. It was such an atmosphere I left for America....In the South daily murders of a nature most hideous and revolting, in the North silent acquiescence, deep hate half-hidden under a Puritan respectability, oft flaming up into an occasional lynching—this ugly raw sore in the body of a great nation. ("Passion" 48).

This statement is significant in understanding and analyzing McKay's "If We Must Die," "The Lynching," and" America"—three works that will be closely analyzed in this paper. Heather Hathaway's description of the influence of McKay's move toward his poetry posits, "[W]hereas the social criticism of his Jamaican poetry revolved almost exclusively around class oppression, the focus of McKay's American verse shifted to address the barbarities of racism" (Hathaway 42). In the endeavor to understand the black experience in America, McKay's reading of W.E.B. Du Bois's Souls of Black Folk inspired his involvement in racial politics, which revolutionized his artistic literary strategies.

Arts vs. Politics

As an associate editor of the *Liberator*, McKay represented the magazine's aspirations of fusing literary-aesthetic matters and political concerns, similar to other periodicals of the time. In his writings, McKay was "most importantly concerned with the relationship of art and politics and the creation of a Black cultural expression rooted in the Black experience" (Helbling 50). The *Liberator* gave him a platform from which to speak and express the complexities of being a Black immigrant in America during the height of racial conflict. However, McKay emphasized the timeless result of literature by separating art from politics—poetry from science—in which focus on the former lent efficacy. McKay, because of his concern toward art and politics, aspires to separate the two as he considered art to be an expression in itself; his motivations for literature were not political but an articulation of his experiences.

Writing as a West Indian, McKay perceived his heritage as complementary to his literary skills and intelligence, rather than a hindrance. McKay's postcolonial-global perspective showed that "coming from countries in which Blacks had experienced no legalized segregations and limitations upon opportunity, West Indians were better prepared to challenge racial barriers in the United States than the more docile American Blacks" (Philipson 146). In the challenge of being a Black immigrant, he was indifferent to integrating himself into the African American context—one that viewed Blacks as second-class citizens, even subhuman beings, socially, politically, and economically. Rather, he sought to be a contributing member of society.

The dilemma of American-based Black writers in the success of portraying the true Black experience in America was at the forefront of McKay's vocal criticism of the Harlem Renaissance. Living in the era of American literary modernism, McKay epitomizes the high modernist characteristics of being "self-reflexive, concerned with its own nature as art" (Baym 1848). He views literature as a genuine reflection of the individual self, and that in itself is art. The Harlem Renaissance, according to McKay, centered on politics rather than the art of literature so much so that the movement lost much of its political substantiality, thus illustrating the need for modernism. In *A Long Way from Home*, he "criticized the writings of the Harlem Renaissance as devoid of any substantial political content and too greatly oriented toward being 'an uplift organization and a vehicle to accelerate the pace and progress of smart Negro society'" (Helbling 49). Nathan Huggins also shared this dilemma that "the task of Negro intellectuals, as they have addressed themselves to the issue of race in American life, has been to delineate Negro character and personality in the American context" (Huggins 139). However, where exactly do African Americans belong in the American context and as part of the broader racial discourse? Are they distinctive in their cultural character? How do they fit in as part of the American Dream and its idealized future?

McKay set out to answer these questions in his work, despite his position that "Negro institutions... are developed only perfunctorily and by compulsion, because Negroes have no abiding faith in them" ("A Long Way From Home" 321). In all his artistic considerations, McKay placed art and poetry as the driving elements of his expression of the Black identity and experience. McKay's individual response to the collective criticism of "If We Must Die" illustrates his artful objective and determination:

To thousands of Negroes who are not trained to appreciate poetry, "If We Must Die" makes me a poet. I myself was amazed at the general sentiment of the poem. For I am so intensely subjective as a poet, that I was not aware, at the moment of writing, that I was transformed into a medium to express a mass sentiment. ("A Long Way From Home" 228).

McKay was more astonished in his success inadvertently to articulate the thoughts and feelings of the Black community than the action itself. Through exegesis of McKay's more prominent works, it is clear that "any connection between art and politics, any fusion that took place, must be one that sprang from the fullness of one's individual life and the existential act of creative expression" (Helbling 51). In the analysis of his renowned poems and classical sonnet form, McKay's biographical background and intellectual temperament are crucial to understanding the efficacy of his creative energy and imagination that advocates for the Black experience and consciousness.

Literary Preludes

McKay's poems "If We Must Die" and "The Lynching" are critical works for the comprehensive dissecting of "America's" motives and themes. Each poem was published chronologically–1919, 1920, and 1921 respectively–presenting a culmination of historical events and McKay's responses to them. Critics essentially agree that the three sonnets are connected thematically, as "they deal with the crucible of race relations, racial pride, culture, history, lineage and roots, so that the effect is like that of a sonnet sequence" (Denizé and Newlin 101). Moreover, as poetic and literary preludes to "America", McKay established his commitment to forge, through art, a new social and political awareness in "If We Must Die" and "The Lynching."

McKay's "If We Must Die" issues a call to confront oppression and resist with dignity. It reveals America's disenfranchising of and discrimination against Blacks through legalized segregation as the primary factor in national disunity. By dehumanizing the oppressed and oppressor, McKay highlights this affair by issuing a revolutionary anthem that empowers the Black community to sustain its humanity and survival. The poem was reprinted in practically every leading Negro magazine and newspaper (Bronz 74). Sociologist Charles S. Johnson deemed the poem to create an effect "a mood of stubborn defiance" (Johnson 170). Even Churchill quoted the poem in one of his World War II speeches.

The poem's universal quality of fighting oppression through resilience and nobility reinforces McKay's artistic ability to produce timeless works, adjustable to the reader's satisfaction and relatability. More importantly, it underlines the capability of expressing communal struggle that supports political intonations without compromising integrity. For instance, McKay criticizes the oppressed's and the oppressor's lost humanity through the personification of animals: "If we must die, let it not be like hogs / Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot / While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs" (2112). McKay wrote the poem in July of 1919 during the period of the Red Summer. The consummation of racial tension and its manifestation with the increasing number of lynchings led him to write "If We Must Die" and the aptly titled poem "The Lynching" in the next year.

"The Lynching" paid homage to the more traditional Elizabethan and Petrarchan sonnets—remnants of the Shakespearean English Renaissance—in contrast to the dark undertones and confronting message of "If We Must Die". Continuing the long tradition of faith influencing the Civil Rights movement, McKay employs several Christian images in the poem (e.g. the crucifixion, the Spirit, the Father and the Son). Nonetheless, modernism is asserted in the ambiguity and conflation of printing "father" in lowercase. Does the "father" imply God or the devil? McKay employs his skillful artistic abilities by capitalizing on the sonnet form from the English Renaissance to the Harlem Renaissance in both poems. Furthermore, on top of his transformative sonnet strategies and artistic emphasis, McKay, imbued by America's traumatic and barbaric Black experience, reinforces his distinct perspective as an immigrant through a hybrid point of view, a double consciousness. In "If We Must Die", the readers can clearly view McKay's struggle between "seeing himself as Jamaican...and seeing himself as African American," foreshadowing the dominant dualism and imagery of "America" (Denizé and Newlin 103).

America

McKay's third sonnet, "America," serves as the apex of the previous two poems, presenting his position and outlook of America as his new home, as well as his experiences from the past decade. In the sonnet "America," Claude McKay demonstrates an artistic perspective toward politics, comparing the distinctly American Black experience—marked by double consciousness—to powerful metaphors that transition the reader, thereby the nation, from racialized anger to eventual hope.

McKay–a master of the poetic form–understood that the ability to produce a work of art gave credibility to an argument. "America" is a typical sonnet, consisting of three quatrains that end with a rhythmic couplet. Although consistent in its alternate rhyme scheme in the first stanza, the pattern loses persistence toward the end, which indicates a shift in the overall substance of the poem. McKay's greatest challenge in writing the poem is perhaps this gradual metamorphosis in imagery and form. An uncertainty in the objectivity and subjectivity of the speaker remains, as he negotiates the tension between conflicting emotions, especially in the lines: "I will confess / I love this cultured hell that tests my youth!" (2112). This line voices the speaker's anger and fascination in criticizing the Black experience in America– "passions evoked by the great promise of equality and innovation, patent traits of the American Dream" (Denizé and Newlin 103). Subsequently, a duality is constructed from the American Dream where "Black men and white men, immigrant and native, have been subject to crises of identity because of [its] promises to include them all in a common culture which has not been realized" (Huggins 137). McKay, Jamaican and American, also presents this in-between liminality—this double consciousness—of the Black experience in the contrasting imagery and metaphorical personification in addition to the ambivalent transitions.

McKay juxtaposes the male subjective speaker against the feminization of America as a matriarchal figure. He also exposes the Black dependency on American reality and the shortcomings of previous traditions of literature that "express human desires for coherence rather than reliable intuitions of reality" (Baym 1847) in lines 6-7: "Giving me strength erect against her hate / Her bigness sweeps my being like a flood" (McKay 2112). Although America "feeds me bread of bitterness / And sinks into my throat her tiger's tooth," McKay's steadfast love for her enables him to pen the strong synergies and radical dynamics expressed in "If We Must Die," a nationalism deeply rooted in the Black experience and identity. The speaker stands "as a rebel fronts a king in state...with not a shred / Of terror, malice, not a word of jeer" and invites his "kinsmen [that they] must meet the common foe!" (McKay 2112-2113). With strong alliterative metaphors, McKay creates vivid imagery, functional for the hopeful closure of the poem. The positive truth of "gaz[ing] into the days ahead / And see her might and granite wonders there" relies and stems essentially from the negative feelings of the speaker's recipient of America's "bread of bitterness" and "her tiger's tooth" (2112-2113). The speaker "loves America and tries to work with [her]. His sentiment is not hate but rather indeterminacy about America and the speaker's 'place' in a nation whose 'place' itself is compromised in posterity by racial hatred" (Denizé and Newlin 104).

The architecture and meaning of "America" are inseparable from McKay's background as a West Indian and political artist. All in all, despite his sojourns to England, France, Spain, Russia, and Morocco, McKay became an American by cultivating a passionate temperament for the country and a personal encounter of the Black experience, sculpting and instilling his love for the "cultured hell" that is America. This fact is supported by his residency and constant returns to Harlem "from 1912 to 1917, from 1919 to 1922, and after the return from his European exile in 1934 to his death" (Lenz 313). Furthermore, inheriting breadcrumbs of slavery and experiencing traces of it through racism and segregation, McKay used his literary aptitude in the exercise of artistic expression and the arts of the sonnet tradition with hints of Christian allusions for the identification of the Black character and exposure of the Black experience, manifested especially in "The Lynching." In "America," however, this fact is seen in the hopeful yet ambivalent tone of the last two lines: "Beneath the touch of Time's unerring hand / Like priceless treasures sinking in the sand," maintaining that Black identity of duality and experience of double consciousness (McKay 2113).

Conclusion

Claude McKay, whether "an American Harlemite or a man of the world, …was unquestionably one of the most important black writers of the 1920" (Baym, "Claude McKay" 2109). Although he produced American material in America, his past as a native Jamaican subject of King George V critiques the two nations' cross-cultural contexts and conditions. McKay's inherent skill and compelling passion for the literary arts realized his works' efficacy of art over politics, in which his "militant sonnets electrified the American left and the Black intelligentsia" (Philipson 146). In his duty to express the Black experience and expose America's harsh, racialized reality, McKay "sought a unifying vision for humankind, and it is this impulse that both inspires and gives his sonnets a timeless quality" (Denizé and Newlin 102). Through critical analysis and dissection of his most prominent works, these qualities of McKay as a poet, politician, and contributor to humanity are self-evident, substantially in "America."

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