



## Militancy and Aesthetics of Poetry: A Study of Claude Mckay Verses Harlem Renaissance

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### Abstract

For a proper understanding of Claude McKay's poetry and literary aesthetics, adequate attention must be paid to the various phases of his development as a poet and his inclination as a political revolutionary activist. These can be divided into: Claude McKay before the 1920s, Claude McKay within the 1920s and Claude McKay beyond the 1930s. These phases are captured in the various collections of verses of the periods. As a Jamaican schoolboy, Claude McKay celebrated his poetic talent in two volumes of his dialectic poetry: *Songs of Jamaica* and *Constab Ballads* (1912).

**Key Words:** Militancy, aesthetics of poetry, Claude Mckey Verses, Harlem Renaissance

### Introduction

These books of poetry reveal his strong lyric gift and keen sensitivity to the good and evil in man and nature, which are summed up in his candid self analysis thus:

Let me confess it at once, I had not in me the stuff that goes to making the good constable; for I am so constituted, it is my misfortune to have a most improper sympathy with wrong doers. I therefore, never "made cases" but turning like Nelson, a blind eye to what it was my manifest duty to see, tried to make peace which seemed to me better. Moreover, I am by temperament unadaptative, by which I mean that it is not in me to comfort cheerfully to

congenial usage. We blacks are all somewhat impatient of discipline and to the natural impatience of my race there was added in my particular case, a peculiar sensitiveness which made certain forms of discipline irksome, and a fierce hatred of injustice. Not that I ever openly revolted, but the rebellion was in my heart and it was tormented by the inevitable rubs of daily life rifles to most of my comrades, but to me calamities and tragedies. To relieve my feelings I wrote poems, and into various moods (*Constab Ballads*, 7, 8).

This confession defines as well as explains the various poems and attitudes of Claude McKay as an African American poet and revolutionary. The 1920s mark the outrage of this Claude McKay's revolutionary spirit with the publication of the poem, "If we must die", a poem that reflects McKay's added experience from Russia, and his subscription among the African-American revolutionaries. As Cooper has observed, "If we must die", was a desperate shout of defiance, almost. It seemed a statement of tragic hopelessness. At the same time, it loudly proclaimed that in the Negro, the spirit of human courage remained fully alive" (*Claude McKay and... 4*).

After the appearance of "If we must die" in *the Liberator*, McKay entered fully into the literary world. His poetry throughout the period depicts a romance of the decade itself. McKay, most importantly was distinguished by his poetry which is loaded with revolutionary instincts as well as military propensity. The tenor of his poetry endeared him to many Negro intellectuals such as: Johnson and Du Bois. In the poems of Claude McKay, he acknowledges that, the fate of the masses or what he calls, "the popular interest" pushes him forward to greater commitment to their liberation. McKay was greatly motivated by his compassion for the low income earners of the African-American society, who to him work so hard, but earn so little.

For Mckay, Negro workers of the South may be roughly divided into four selections. Those in the cities are: stevedores, small factory workers and artisans, while those in the country are: small farmers and cotton plantation workers... (*The Racial Question* ...1). These workers in their various categories are disillusioned. They have many serious grievances against "White" Americans, such as lynching, disenfranchisement, and serfdom in the South, and social and industrial discrimination in the North. Hence these grievances should be expressed in a race consciousness and rebellion, not in revolution and class consciousness only. In this Mckay differs from the ideologies of Marxism as Cooper has observed that, "despite Mckay's sincere attraction to the communist revolution, he never fully committed himself to its ideology. In the 1930s, he was viciously attacked by American Communist Party for going back on his principles (*Claude Mckay* and ...4). Nevertheless, Claude Mckay's poetry during this period reveals his revolutionary ideologies which are explicit in the art of poetry. The military undertone of his verses defines him as an aesthetic radical, because they stoutly affirmed the values of his non-social personality.

Beyond the 1920s, Claude Mckay shows his plain disenchantment with all the shades of Communist political thoughts and ideology, most importantly, his actions concerning problems of the Communist radicals. As Gates Henry has noted,

Initially, it was mostly socialists and economic radicals who made up the New Negro Harlem radicals. But they were an inconstant group due to the shifting political attitudes and allegiances surrounding the formation of the communist party in America. By 1921, the America socialist party was fractured, its revolutionary left wing breaking away to join the newly formed American Communist party. These divisions were reflected in the relationships of the Harlem radicals, many of

whom became bitter enemies in a short period of time (5).

The above may as well be the reason behind Claude McKay's later subscription to Catholicism. In a letter he wrote to Max Eastman he says, "I must announce to you that on October 11, the feast of the maternity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, I was baptized into the Catholic (Roman) faith" (304). In a part of the same letter, he gives his reason thus: "anyway this is a new experience for me and, I suppose the final stage of my hectic life. I am not less a fighter. Indeed, one reason for choosing the Catholic Church is that besides the religious side, it is the greatest political organization in the world and a bulwark against the menace of Communism" (*Passion*, 305). This stand defines Claude McKay's later life and poetry. On the literary scene, Claude McKay's poetry has also been grouped accordingly as: dialects poems, militant or revolutionary poetry and poetry of Catholicism. In each of the groups the definition and use of the dual consciousness of the Negroes have always defined his aesthetic choices. These are expressed in the various imageries, symbols and allusion used in expressing the concept of Africa and America in relation to the Negro person.

Claude McKay's dialectic poems include *Songs of Jamaica* (1912) and *Constab Ballads* (1912) these poems are nevertheless attempts by a Black West Indian to portray realistically the life of his people. These poems are illustrations of the Jamaican psychological and social values before the World War I. However, these works are indispensable to the full understanding and appreciation of McKay's subsequent development in revolutionary aesthetics in his African-American poetry. For despite the youthful obeisance and creative obsession, McKay have started at that time to show propensity for rebellion against racism.

In "To E.M.E." McKay expresses the bitter feelings that runs his marrow as a result of the society's racism and racial prejudice. These are expressed in lines, like in the following "You see me smile but what is it a sweetened pain – a laughing fit – a little honeyed dart that passing stabs my heart, yet met me glad a bit" (*Songs of Jamaica*, 51).

To Mckay, racism has made the African-American a hyphenated person with dual personality, which often conflict in both his private and public lives. As Cooper has observed, Mckay's early Jamaican poetry is responses to the experiences of his black peasant origins, with an apt expression of a desire to return to the tranquil countryside of his youth experiences (*Passion...4*), however the poems are a mere reaffirmation of his disillusionment and pessimism, which cannot be cured by a simple retreat to the countryside. With such background, Mckay develops into a militant revolutionary poet, with his famous poem "If we must Die".

In Mckay's essay "Soviet Russia and the Negro" he acknowledges this thus, "My birthright, and the historical background of the race that gave it to me, made me very respectful and receptive of propaganda and world events, since the year 1914 has proved that it is no mean science of conveying information" (1). Beyond his earliest ambition to be a creative writer, Mckay categorically says that, the broader view did not merely include propaganda literature in his literary outlook it also swung him away from his childish age pleasurable curiosity to another sought for the motivating force or propaganda intent that underlies all literature of interest" ("Soviet Russia and the Negro" 1). It is this predisposition defines the revolutionary poetry and aesthetic of Claude Mckay's militant poetry. Hence he states,

The label of propaganda will be affixed to what I say ... I shall not mind, propaganda has now come into its respectable rights and I am proud of being a propagandist. The difference between propaganda and art was impressed on my boyhood mind by a literary mentor, Miltons poetry and his political prose set side by side as the supreme examples(1).

Although Johnson and Johnson have defined the relationship between propaganda and aesthetic in the literary politics of Afro-American magazines in the twentieth century, however, beyond the aesthetics of propaganda, Claude Mckay draws in the revolutionary aesthetics

into the Negro Question. As he asserts in his letter to Max Eastman “What I say that Negro Question is an integral part and one of the chief problems of the struggle in America, and I stand by that declaration”(3). As Cooper has also maintained,

Of all the Renaissance writers, Claude Mckay was one of the first to express the spirit of the New Negro. His first American poem appeared in 1917. Before the decade of the Negro Renaissance had begun, he was already winning recognition as an exciting new voice in Negro literature. A brief examination of his early career will perhaps reveal more clearly some of the characteristics of the New Negro of the 1920s (Claude Mckay and ...1).

This spirit was interpreted by Locke in his essay “The New Negro” thus,

For the younger generation is vibrant with a New spirit is awake in the masses, and under the very eyes of the professional observes is transforming what has been a perennial problem into the progressive phase of contemporary Negro life... Negro seems suddenly to have slipped from under the tyranny of social intimidation and to shaking off the psychology of imitation and implied inferiority (1961-962).

This break from the Uncle Tom Syndrome of the old Negro, seeks expression in the militant aesthetics in Claude Mckay’s definition of the Negro past and contemporary times. For Claude Mckay, Africa remains a place where dark things are done, while America seemed to him as a new land to which all people that had youth and the youthful mind turned to. These big contents and the experiences America offers do not affect him more than the Negro community, but he is

very optimistic that soon there would be opportunity in America even for the Negro.

Notwithstanding his inexperience of American racial prejudice, he vigorously fought against racism with courage and recourse to African past greatness, without any endorsement to the Garvites and their back to Africa movement. The year 1919 of the Great Red Scare, turned out to be a nightmare of bloody riots and violent death. The records show that from January until June not less than twenty-five riots occurred in the major urban centres throughout the country. McKay felt the emotional effects of such battles, especially when he recalled the number of innocent people lynched cold bloodedly. Hence in "If we must Die" the poet speaker, like a military general defines the struggle in America (*The Tom Tom...26*). Poems like: "America", "Baptism", "To the White Fiend" and others Claude McKay registered his protest in African-American literature. But beyond the details of protest, McKay's the poems draw from the American wars: between labour and capital, and between the coloured folk and white. McKay, commenting on "If we must Die" has noted:

Among my new poems there was a sonnet entitled "if we must die". It was the most recent of all. Great events and it occurred between the time when I first met Frank Harris and my meeting with Max Eastman. The world war had ended. But its end was a signal for the outbreak of little wars between labour and capital and like a plague breaking out in some places between colored folk and white (A long Way... 1).

Apart from the above, both the title and the content define the class stratification of the characters. The poet-speaker identifies with the threatened party. "If we must die, let it not hogs// Hunted and penned in an inglorious sport/ While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs;/ Making their mock at our accursed lot"// (*Selected Poems*, 36). This quatrain rhetorically exposes the scene of the

lynching of the Negro. McKay's description of the lot of the Negro as "accursed", this lot he has built into a class against the opponents, who like mad and hungry dogs, bark around them even at the inglorious spots of their hidings. The second quatrain, which completes the octet, recounts the honour and greatness of noble death of the braves, but indirectly condemned a life of cowardice on the part of the oppressed. "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 honour us though dead" (*Selected Poems*, 36). As Maxwell has noted: "With steely propriety, the poem put forth the creed of a New Negro whose modernity rested on self-defense as much as Marxism and the metropolis" (*New Negro*, 3).

This fact is clearly stated in the battle front description in the sestet: O Kinsmen! We must meet the common foe!/ Though far outnumbered let us show us brave// And for their thousand blows deal one deathblow!/ What though before us lies the open grave/ Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,/ pressed to the wall, dying but fighting back! (*Selected poems*, 36). The phrase "O kinsmen!" defines the class to which the poet-speaker belongs and identifies with. As Alount has noted, in "Caged Birds: Race and Gender in the Sonnet", this call makes the participation explicit; the poet-speaker's would be warriors are people who belong to the same class and share the same experience. In fact, McKay gives public voice to other blacks who may have been speaking privately for all black people. Commenting on the people's reactions McKay says, "If we must die" exploded out of me. And for it, the Negro people unanimously hailed me as a poet. Indeed, that one grand outburst is their sole standard of appraising my poetry (*A long way*, 3). By this sonnet, McKay becomes a representative of the collective African-American self within the slender technical boundaries of the sonnet form.

But beyond the sonnet form, McKay etches into the consciousness of literate black Americans of all generation, as a model of class heroism which is an important point of reference for the entire racial experience and a touch-stone of the African-American subject in liberation struggles. Moreso, the poem speaks for the entire race as



down-trodden class on need for fighting for their liberation. The sonnet form as it were becomes an appropriate battle field definition of the contest between McKay's sense of himself as a gentleman and the need to respond to racial violence with violence.

In "To the White Fiends" McKay extends the advantages of the Negro as a class to the black deeds of Africa. With this he challenges the white class in the exploitation: "Think you I am not fiend and savage too/ Think you I could not arm me with a gun/ And shoot down ten of you for everyone of/ my black brothers murdered, burnt by you//. The first quatrain draws attention to oversight and underestimation, which the villains may not have considered. But most importantly, it recalls the weapons which the black can use, but for some sort of self-discipline, but made it clear to their opponent that, they don't have the monopoly of violence. The second quatrain advises the white folk no to be deceived, because silence does not always mean weakness. My soul and said: Even thou shall be a light/A while to burn on the benighted earth/ Thy ducky face I set among the white/For thee to prove thy little lamp; go forth go// (Selected Poems, 38). The sestet depicts the blacks in America as light; thus referring to the labours of the Africa-American ancestors, which have made America great. The fact that the poet-speaker defines his role as divine, from the almighty, commends their patience in spite of their inherited power as black of African descent.

In "Outcast", McKay recalls the ordeal of struggling to find a place for the black in the American society. Hathaway has observed, that "Outcast", perhaps most poignantly reveals the multitude of allegiances McKay sought only to find himself in the end alone" (*Cultural Crossing*. 1). The first quatrain dwells on the poet-speaker's desire to be part of a world, which exists, in his nostalgic recollection, where his forefather lived, but to no avail. For the dim regions whence my father came/ My spirit, bondages by the body longs/ World felt, but never heard, my lips would frame/ My soul would sing forgotten jungle songs// (*Selected poems*, 41). The fact that this region is dim, and only can be conceived in forgotten jungle songs, speaks of the distant nature of Africa in the life and activities of the

African-Americans. According to the poem, "In succumbing to the alien gods", the poet's speaker has lost part of an essential blackness that is rooted in Africa. I would go back to darkness and to peace/ But the great western would hold me in fee/ And I may never hope for full release/ While to its alien gods I bend my knee// (*Selected Poems*, 41). Though this darkness provides a sort of serenity, he can go back to such peace, because of the holds of the Western world, from which he does not hope for a full release.

As Hathaway has observed that, the poet-persona of Claude McKay depicts his romantic conceptions of Africa and his self-determined inability to possess fully a type of essential blackness, because of his notable attraction to and contact with the "white" aspect of Western culture. (*Cultural Crossing...3*), hence the poet speaker asserts, "Something in me is lost forever lost/ Some vital thing has gone out of my heart/ And I must walk the way of life a ghost/ Among the sons of earth, a thing apart/ For I was born, far from my native clime// Under the white man's menace clime, out of time (*Selected poems*, 41). Fanon has asserted the dual primality of the Negro person as an important feature of the poems of Claude McKay in relation to colonialism in Africa. The Negro problem does not resolve itself in the problem of Negroes living among white men, but rather of Negroes exploited, enslaved, despised by a colonialist, capitalist society, that is accidentally white (*Black Colonial...6*).

This exploitation manifests in the loss of identity, which becomes more pronounced in the "double consciousness" which creates a deep and troubling sense of despair, which offers no political reconciliation to the African-American. "Outcast" provides the reader with facts to see how slavery makes the desire for primitive pre-colonial Africa possible. It also shows how colonialism, in a sense, negates the fullness of this desire into a lack of self-fulfillment. But beyond colonialism, the African-American case puts the Negro into cultural and political limbo that keeps him always under the spell of fighting for identity, within the hybridity of experiences in the American Society. This feature reflects vividly in the troubling ambivalence of the black race, which can be located in the New Negro movement of

the 1920s. However, this situation keeps, the black man in perpetual servitude and inhuman exploitation, which Gracia describes as “Soulless captivity” an equivalent of the great Lord or Vassal relationship, with the feudal bondsman, under the feudal system (Black Colonial...” 6).

Apart from making the sonnet his popular style of writing poems, McKay in the Catholic poems adopted Christology as an integral pre-occupation in his revolutionary aesthetics. In these verses, he appropriates the salvation works of Jesus Christ as the most expedient and available hope for both the oppressed and the oppressors in the American politic of racism and segregation. Most of these poems are in prayer form, in which the poet pours out his heart desire at the altar of his God.

In “The Negro’s Tragedy” published in the July-August issue of the Catholic Worker, where McKay says, “I turn to God for greater strength to fight” and “Around me roar and crash paganism”. McKay pours out his heart and his yearnings on the Negro Question, which is translated in “The Negro’s Tragedy”. He recaptures the Negro chains, wounds, pains and the shroud of night, which describe the conglomeration of the Negro’s experiences in the American society;

It is the Negro’s tragedy I feel which binds  
Me like a heavy iron chain,  
It is the Negroes wounds I want to heal  
Because I know the keenness of his pain.  
Only a thorn crowned Negro and no white  
Can penetrate into the Negro’s ken.  
Or feel the thickness of the shroud of night, which  
hide and buries  
Him from other men (Selected Poems, 50).

Eckhardt has seen this poem as an identity poem par excellence, complicated by the Christology that McKay develops throughout the Catholic Worker Sonnet (“On Claude McKay’s ...”i). Beyond this perception, the poet-speaker identifies his messianic role to his

people. Being one with them he expresses willingness to bear their burden as the Christ of salvation. Most importantly, he defines the class he speaks for, being part of them and understands their plight which whites do not know. Hence he declares, "Only a thorn-crowned Negro and no white can penetrate into the Negro ken". This is an addition to race consciousness, drawing from the crown of thorn which Christ wore at Calvary in the Catholic faith.

Indeed, Christ's ministry of reconciliation is given a prominent place in the *Catholic Worker* Sonnets of McKay. The reference re-echoes the suffering Christ, and the mocking of the Jews with Roman soldiers. These Christo-centric poems maintain that only a suffering Christ whom the "Negro" must follow is able to understand and correct their social position.

In the sestet, McKay distinguishes himself by the experiences which the whites have not; a criterion, which gives him position to write whatever he writes.

So what I write is shot out of my blood  
There is no white man who could write my  
Book  
Though many think the story can be told  
Of what the Negro people ought to brook  
Our statesmen roam the world to set things  
right.  
("The Negro's Tragedy..." 11,9-14).

McKay in all his poetry defines the Negro class and the experiences, both in the past and the present. This factor so distinguishes the blacks that no matter how zealous a white anti-racist poses to be, he is still an alien to Negro experience. Although there were many white anti-racists on the left and the Catholic workers movement, such involvement in the Negro liberation does not give them the first hand information on Negro experiences. The fight by these white anti-racists can never be thorough; therefore the Negroes could only laugh at the mediocrity and pray to God who really understands their plight and need for light.

The “Catholic Worker Sonnets” are both continuations of the Negro revolution and McKay’s expression of his new found faith in the Catholic Church. In “Look Within” the first sonnet McKay published in the *Catholic Worker* in January 1945 issue, the poet-speaker prayed for strength to speak against the fascist yoke trying to engulf the United States. As Eckhardt has observed,

The trouble for McKay’s speaker, on the other hand, is not being distracted from Europe by the fantasies possible in relatively peaceful U.S. condition, but just the opposite: being distracted from U.S. fascism by the less, immediate European variety (1).

The poet-speaker imagines the fate of the black under fascism in America, especially in relation to the European form of fascism and their highhanded dictators. Hence he uses the opening quatrain to pray for the over fifteen million Negroes, who like the speaker, are praying for salvation from the fascist yoke of the United States. “I lived for a moment in a world where I was free to be with the things and people that I love, and I was happy there, I forgot for a moment Holland, I forgot my heavy care” (The Catholic... 11). The desire to write for the blacks in America under the liberation agenda in the Negro Question remains an ambition in the poetry of Claude McKay. In each of the poems published in the *Catholic Worker*, McKay re-echoes his solace in the salvation work of Christ. Beyond this “look within” is McKay’s practical interpretation of the New Testament, especially Mathew 7: 4-5, Luke 41: 2 and Matthew 23: 27-8. Drawing from these portions of the scripture, McKay denounces and the vehemently accuses the United States’ foreign and domestic policy. This prayerful denunciation vehemently accuses the United States of large scale, hypocritical and downright sinful radicalized fascism. “Remove the beam (Nearly two thousand years since Jesus spoke) from your own eyes, before the mote you deem it/proper from your neighbours to extract.../But Jesus said: you whited sepulcher pretending to be uncorrupt of sin while worm/infested, rotten

through within.” (6-9, 12-14). In other words, the poet-speaker advises America to look within for thorough cleansing before looking somewhere else.

In summary, McKay’s revolutionary aesthetics in his analysis of the Negro Question remains constant in spite of the changing faces of his life experiences and his development as a poet. This military consistency can be seen in his romances with his racial pride, greater self-sufficiency group cohesion and in his artistic message. This consciousness was planted in him as a Jamaican village boy, but it was nurtured and flourished in the communist Party of the United States of America, and matured in his Catholic faith, define his militancy and aesthetics as an African-American poet of the Harlem renaissance and beyond.

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