

An essay on the literary works of claude mckay



**ASSIGN
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African-American history often teaches of prominent figures that made a significant impact on not only the African-American community, but on America as a whole. Not often are we familiar with those leaders who are not mentioned in our textbooks but ironically defined literary movements in our African-American history. Fetus Claudius McKay is that leader. Claude McKay was born in Jamaica in 1899. He was a restless and talented young man.

In Jamaica, McKay met Walter Jekyll, a white British ex-priest and folklorist, who encouraged McKay to write in his native Jamaican dialect. His first two books consisted of interesting, challenging, and politically charged poems. He won a prize in 1912 and with his winnings he left for Kansas where he attended Tuskegee Institute to study agriculture. His stay in Kansas was very brief due to the highly-active presence of the Ku Klux Klan, in which he then moved to New York. In 1919, there were 28 public lynchings in the first half of the year and the following summer and fall became known as the "The Red Summer". The Red Summer" was the driving motivational force behind McKay's "If We Must Die". Although one may not know the history behind this particular poem, the poem still holds a very powerful message, and universal enough to relate to any body of people facing their own destruction. Claude McKay wrote "If We Must Die" amid the bloodshed of 1919. In this poem, he encourages his community to take action and fight back. Consider the last two lines of "If We Must Die," which says, "Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,/ Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back! The message here is action-oriented and immediate. McKay

was not looking into the past, but examining the present and the future. In studying the work and ideas of Claude McKay in this particular poem "If We Must Die", one can better understand the diversity and thought of the black community during that time. Although many of his works were not published mainstream, he probably did more than anyone else to define that literary movement. He watched his fame and popularity gradually disappear as his last years were passed in sickness.

If given a few more years, he would have seen them rise again. His choice of writing was as correct as it was courageous, and his place in not only American but the world's literature is unique and assured. Works Cited
McKay, Claude. "If We Must Die." The Norton Anthology of American Literature, 2nd. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr.. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc. , 2004. 1007. "Claude McKay Biography." The Biography Channel Website. <http://www.biography.com/people/abraham-lincoln-9382540> (accessed March 1, 2011).