

Claude mckay ; jean toomer essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Claude McKay was born on September 15th 1890, in the West Indian island of Jamaica. He was the youngest of eleven children. At the age of ten, he wrote a rhyme of acrostic for an elementary-school gala. He then changed his style and mixed West Indian folk songs with church hymns. At the age of seventeen he met a gentleman named Walter Jekyll, who encouraged him to write in his native dialect. Jekyll introduced him to a new world of literature. McKay soon left Jamaica and would never return to his homeland.

In 1912, only 23 years old, Jekyll paid his way to the United States to study agriculture at Tuskegee Institute. Before leaving Jamaica, McKay had gotten a reputation as a poet. He had produced two volumes of dialect poetry, *Song of Jamaica* and *Constab Ballads*. His work is said to always echo both the British colony's musical dialect and the sharp anger of its subject race. McKay moved to Harlem, New York in 1914, during a very discriminating time. His first American poem appeared in 1917. Of all the Renaissance writers, he was one of the first to express the spirit of the New Negro. By 1921, McKay had become the associate editor of a magazine called, *The Liberator*, a socialist magazine of art and literature. In 1922, Harcourt, Brace and Company published a collection of seven poems called, *Harlem Shadows*. This made him receive the status of being the first significant black poet. Even though he was considered an African-American icon, McKay said he still considered himself an "alien guest." His accurate view of Harlem night life pleased many white readers of the twenties and disappointed a few middle-class Negroes. They felt that too much emphasis on the Negro lower class would damage their fight for civil rights and delay their battle for liberty. McKay was not the only writer of the Negro Renaissance to upset

respectable Negro society. One of the chief results of the Negro Renaissance was to force the Negro middle class to reevaluate their relationship to the Negro groups.

McKay stressed the value of the common Negro and joined other Negro Renaissance writers in a rediscovery of Negro folk culture. For in his poetry, he best expressed the New Negro's determination to protect his human dignity, his cultural worth, and his right to a decent life. After working closely with Max Eastman, he traveled to Moscow in 1923 in sympathy with the Bolshevik Revolution and became a sort of national hero there. Claude McKay died in 1948.

McKay was not the only writer of the Negro Renaissance to upset respectable Negro society. During the end of 1921, McKay started receiving stories from a gentleman named Jean Toomer. Nathan Eugene Toomer was born in Washington, DC on December 26, 1894. His surname was Pinchback but he used his father's last name as an adult and changed his name from Eugene to Jean when he began to write. Toomer spent his early years in Washington in the home of his grandparents. They were racially mixed and could have been considered white but his grandfather identified with the blacks. He attended six institutions of higher education, but never graduated. In 1921, he accepted a job as a substitute principal at a school in Georgia. This gave him a chance to study the people in the south and discover his black roots.

Toomer's greatest contribution to literature was *Cane*. It was composed of poetry, short stories, drama that covers African-American culture in the south. After writing this he was considered one of the most promising black

writers of this time. Countee Cullen said it was “ a real race contribution, a classical portrayal of things as they are.” His writing after *Cane* was never published, mostly because his post-*Cane* works were considered tedious and boring. Toomer became troubled over his inability to publish. In the 1940's he started having eye and kidney problems. His mental and physical state deteriorated and on March 30, 1967, he died of arteriosclerosis. Toomer wrote vigorously until his death, and although much of his writing received occasional praise for its experimentation, African-Americans mostly dismissed it.