

# Claude mckay:the power and duality in his poetry

Profession, Poet



The Harlem Renaissance was a period when African-American writers, artists expressed and articulated themselves through their writing and art. It was a remarkable era, as for the first time in history, African-American writers and poets were popularly accredited in America. While many of the writers of the Harlem Renaissance were born and raised in the U. S., McKay, of Jamaican origin, was slanted differently vis-à-vis his viewpoint. His poems ' America' and ' If We Must Die' explored the intricate and unique connection African Americans had with their ethnicity. His poems chanted America with words that mixed love and hate, pain and pleasure, contempt and veneration. He viewed America impassionately with all its virtues and vices because he had chosen America as his home. By probing ' America' and ' If We Must Die', one discovers how McKay builds upon Du Bois' concept of " Double consciousness" which is shown through his adoration and frustration for America in the former poem and repulsion in the latter, ergo giving a voice to Black Americans to discuss the subtle and overt identity conflict and racism.

Respect and revulsion are two of the most overwhelming emotions that can be experienced. Outwardly, these sentiments appear dissimilar as they are polar contraries but diving in the depths produces some evocative similarities. In the poem " America", the reader is treated to the manifestation of both of these emotions in a poem replete with provoking opposition and weighty statements about society. Prior to McKay's ' America' and ' If We Must Die', another prominent Harlem Renaissance writer, W. E. B. Du Bois, wrote about the ' two-ness' or ' Double Consciousness' of African Americans. " Double consciousness can be defined as " the conscious

splitting of the inner self in an attempt to create a character that would be accepted into mainstream society" (Du Bois, 3). The concept explains how African Americans are wedged between being Black and being American. This was a crucial issue in countless Harlem Renaissance writings as the writers grappled with being part of a country that celebrated liberty, and at the same time being constrained by the African ethnic identity.

The essay focuses on ' America' and ' If We Must Die' out of the all the poems from McKay's treasure chest of anthologies because the above two poems perfectly and precisely delivered what it was to be Black in America. The unusual ardor and emotion in the poems makes them stand out. McKay was distinctive as he was the first Harlem Renaissance writer to express the spirit of the New Negro. The " New Negro" is a term propagated during the Harlem Renaissance suggesting a more candid promotion of self-respect and a refusal to submit peacefully to the practices and laws of Jim Crow racial discrimination. The term " New Negro" was made popular by Alain LeRoy Locke. McKay seems to be obeying conventional, ' white' ideas of poetry by writing a Shakespearean sonnet. " He believed Western societies were far more advanced than those in Africa and that in certain ways black men brought to the West were fortunate; moreover, he thought of himself as a child of the western civilization." (Hansell 1) But the fact that the poem itself is about Black identity issues proves that he is in an identity crisis just like most other African-Americans. Many poets before and after McKay have talked about the theory of ' Double consciousness', but most of them have aspired and referred to the co-existence of both African and American cultures.

However, unlike them, McKay vehemently believed that the two identities were irreconcilable and there was no way a person could live with two very contrasting principles. For example, in "I, Too", Hughes, another Harlem Renaissance poet, foresees a black poet being a part of an American 'family' and says, "Tomorrow, / I'll be at the table / When company comes. / ... Besides, / They'll see how beautiful I am / And be ashamed / I, too, am America." (8-18). In "Theme for English B", Hughes says, "You are white- / yet a part of me, as I am a part of you. / That's American." (31-33). We can observe from the above stanzas that Hughes is far more concerned about making Blacks a part of America, unlike McKay who always finds himself as an outsider and thus never attempts to merge his dual identity.

Many poets in the Harlem Renaissance movement were born in America but since McKay was born in Jamaica, he approached the concept from an international perspective and was more critical to the experiences of spoken and unspoken "apartheid" in America. It is also interesting that "McKay did not learn protest by being the victim of American racism. Before he had come to the United States he had protested against injustice, the cruelty of man, the misunderstandings that ignorance could engender, and the evils of deprivation. For the general disharmonies, he blamed fate; for specific evils, he put the primary responsibility on individuals." (Hansell 139) Therefore, unlike many poets, McKay did not completely blame the Americans his or his community's misery. McKay's writings are often termed separatist in nature as they were significantly influenced by his non-American stature. 'America' is a sonnet composed of triple quatrains and a couplet composed in iambic

pentameter. The poem sees the speaker constantly oscillate between his concentrated feelings of positivity and negativity that he has for America.

The dichotomy of dual emotions in the poem mirrors the attitude of the African-American citizen during the time the sonnet was published. In the poem, America is personified and addressed as an entity with whom the speaker seems to have a bitter-sweet relationship. In the first stanza, McKay vents his contempt for America and the way it has treated him; however, he also expresses his reliance on the country. When McKay says “ Although she feeds me bread of bitterness” (1), the ambiguous speaker is telling that he or she relies on America for his or her sustenance as a newborn depends on his mother. The receptive reader gauges the fact that America provides for the speaker, though the food being fed is unpleasant and upsetting. This statement approaches the buried emotions experienced by the Black Americans regarding their limited rights in the South. The blacks were given pseudo-equal rights, as the rights were limited to only a minuscule part of the Black population who matched unrealistic expectations both financially and socially. This led to deep-rooted hostility among African Americans. The speaker fervently felt that America was a parasite that sapped the life out of his body and it is clearly supported by the lines, “ sinks into my throat her tiger’s tooth, / Stealing my breath of life, I will confess” (2-3). This is another scathing remark on the unjust treatment of blacks that shattered the pride and soul of the people. The speaker makes a controversial move and says- “ I must confess, / I love this cultured hell that tests my youth!” (3-4) which is quite contradictory to the anguish with which the poem opened.

The dyad element is evident in transition of both the tonality and the confession made by the speaker, and it clearly relays to Du Bois' theory of Double Consciousness. In the following lines, the speaker uses the phrase "cultured hell" (4) an oxymoron. The speaker lets his guard down and unabashedly confesses enjoying the grime that exists in American culture. He suddenly presents America as a guilty pleasure and he is no longer averse to admitting it. He thus makes a potent example of the dichotomy that exists throughout the piece and in the minds of many African-Americans who are in a love-hate relationship with America. It seems as if McKay relishes the challenges, both physical and intellectual, that American society presented to him during this time period.

McKay, the poet, too seems to savor the trials that society hits him with during that period, and that is clearly reflected in his writing and poetry. The second stanza starts off on a more positive note and is strongly suggestive of the optimistic feelings the speaker has for America. " Her vigor flows like tides into my blood, / Giving me strength erect against her hate" (5-6). This line is one of the most powerful lines in the poem evocative as it is of the tactic imagery which the reader senses as they convey the speaker's passion purely fueled by the nascence of America. While the speaker is boldly proclaiming that America is the source of his strength, he is rebelling against the provider of that very strength and using it to stand up against the racial hate that was prevalent during this time period in America. Although the speaker is fervently against the racism in America, he feels that he is just a drop in the ocean of the struggle for equality which is clearly echoed by the line- " Her bigness sweeps my being like a flood" (7). His feelings are

relatable because often we fear losing our individuality and identity, we fear facing the masses as they approach us like a deluge. The speaker feels the same way as he communicates the ineffectiveness of one person combating the bigoted history of a nation unaccompanied. However, he is brave enough to take a solid stand and express his views as candidly as possible through his work. A rebel in a king's presence is sure to see his doom. The speaker talks about the prospect of standing in front of a king like a rebel and awaiting censure and penalty. He compares standing in front of the rigid racism to the above and says, " Yet as a rebel fronts a king of state, / I stand with her walls with not a shred / Of terror, malice, not a word of jeer" (8-10). Interestingly, here, it is the reaction from the " king" that breaks down the expected barrier within the interaction between the two parties. He does not raid, nor does he express malice to the unknown standing in his court. The rebel stands tall and mighty before the king within his fortifications because he is sheltered by law.

McKay gives us an interesting metaphor to convey the true variance of the American system and the reality that existed within America at the time. The speaker like many Africans lived in the gray- the constant tussle of being White or Black. America is the source of his strength, but it also is the cause of his angst and frustration. Like many African Americans, the speaker desires to be true to his cultural roots in Africa, but America is home though the feeling of alienation haunts him. This expression resonates the concept of ' Dual Consciousness' explained by W. E. B. Du Bois and echoes what every Africa-American experiences. The poem settles on a melancholy note as the speaker foretells what lies ahead for America- " Darkly I gaze into the

days ahead, / And see her might and granite wonders there, / Beneath the touch of Time's unerring hand, / Like priceless treasures sinking in the sand" (11-14). Conventionally in the United States, in order to pay homage to a noteworthy citizen, or a significant event, a stone memorial is erected for posterity to commemorate the feats of those who have gone before.

In this passage, the speaker is examining the statues that remind people of America's inspiring history. The speaker then foretells that America shall eventually wilt in memory with the passage of time. The speaker ingeniously uses the phrase " sinking in the sand" (14) which leads the reader to believe that the speaker knows of America's brevity similar to most civilizations that ebbed into the sands of inconsequence over time. The robust use of metaphor and duplicity in the poem gives it a forceful slant. The stark dualism that McKay delivers is the sole purpose behind the prose. The points build a strong nexus with all those African-Americans who felt so during the 20th century and it urges them to acknowledge this feeling and allow it to empower them instead of making them feel demoted. The chaotic yelp that McKay releases from the lines of this poem are the reverberations of a group wedged between true parity and false hope. From diving deep into the depths of the speaker's emotional and confused mind in ' America', the reader almost feels throttled by the tonality of ' If We Must Die' and the militant message it tries to disseminate. Although McKay denied referring specifically to the Blacks and the Whites in the poem, the fact that it was penned following the " Red Summer" of 1919 when the anti-black riots broke out, makes the sonnet reverberate the despair of the Africa-Americans



during that time. “ The persona calls black men in America to arm against racial oppression and lynching.

He further goes on to urges them to defy all sinister forces and meet violence with violence in ascertaining their ethical dignity in their struggle for social, economic and political emancipation regardless of all odds.”

(Adewumi and Bolawale 17) McKay uses a derisive tone throughout the poem, quite contrary to the one used in ‘ America’ and seems to cross the fence from devotion to anguish. The speaker aims at empowering Black Americans and emphasizes the significance of an honorable death. The existence and dreadful death of African Americans is pertinently equated to the rearing and nurturing of a hog only to be slaughtered. The rhetoric used here hits the nail on the head as it makes a powerful impact. Hogs are gelded male pigs and the reference indicates that Black people were rendered helpless and had to die without a choice. “ hunted and penned in an inglorious spot” (McKay 2), goes on to show the aspect of being trapped in a pen; just as pigs. The revolting contrast is intentional as McKay wants the gravitas of the troubles to cement firmly into the minds of his people. He wants the readers to get affected so that their conscience can comprehend what his people were then undergoing.

McKay is strongly connected to the African-Americans in this poem and he directly addresses them. This poem is to all those who are subjugated, specifically the Blacks, and they are the people referred to in this poem. The speaker implores his people to passionately resist all those who murder them by saying, “ If we must die, O let us nobly die, so that our precious

blood may not be shed in vain.” (McKay 5-7). He wants them to forget the notion of being moral through non-violence and shows them nobility in purposeful death. The opening line “ If we must die” is supposed to incite the rebels to act irrespective of the consequences and is conveyed in the line, “ then even the monsters we defy shall be constrained to honor us though dead.” (McKay 7-8). It is interesting to note the contrast in the speaker’s mind as on one hand he gives them hope, but on the other hand, he tells them that death is impending and inevitable. The duality and uncertainty are explained by the conditional clause “ if” in the poem.

McKay strains on mortality throughout the poem and seems preoccupied with the manner of death rather than the time of death. The setting of the poem is one of a brewing war and McKay urges his people to stay united and fight for their honor regardless of the outcome. He says, “ O Kinsmen! We must meet the common foe! Though far outnumbered let us show us brave.” (8-9) and warns them they might be digging their own grave but courage is more important than victory. He urges them to never give up-“ Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back.” It can be strongly argued that the poem addresses only men in the society as the imagery and tone used in the poem are masculine for example, “ Like men we’ll face the murderous, cowardly pack.” (McKay 13). The poem seems to say that that the act of rebellion is associated with men and masculine visual imagery is used to enforce acts of warfare and hunting. The assertion of an honorable fight brings the distinction between cowards and real men in the concluding line of the poem and it intends to give a voice to African Americans and instill in them that they deserve an honorable death. McKay wants his people to deliver the

ultimate death blow knowing that they might not survive and he wants them to know that death under oppression for liberty makes it all the more honorable.

The theme of nobility and honor is summed up by the line, " shall be constrained to honor us though dead!" Dogs represent the enemy in this poem and the image of vicious and hungry dogs creates fear among the readers. The poem, like many of McKay's poems, ends on a blue and dual note. He calls the enemy a cowardly pack but at the same time tells his people bluntly to fight back knowing that death might be imminent—" pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!" Brevity is emphasized and conveyed by McKay and leaves the readers with hope that the death of his people shall bear fruits for posterity in the form of true equality and humanity.

The impact of the poem was significant and astonishing to even McKay himself. " If We Must Die" became, as Joel Rogers put it in 1927, really the " Marsellaise of the American Negro." (James 17) A generation later, Melvin Tolson, the distinguished Afro-American poet, similarly noted that the poem was the anthem and McKay a symbol of the militant New Negro in the aftermath of the First World War and not just in the United States. " Indeed, " If We Must Die" is not only one of the most famous poems ever written by one of Africa's children; the poem also became the rallying cry of oppressed peoples of all colors, all over the world." (James 17) The reason for the fame can be attributed to both the poem and the poet's state of mind. Both McKay and his poems were inflicted with a dual conscience. We see a burning

passion and reverence for America in the poem of the same name and we also see the speaker's desolation. In ' If We Must Die', the poet out rightly criticizes the Whites by calling them the " enemy" and entreats his people to retaliate. Thus, McKay's dual conscience is evident. The fact that the name of the country is the title of the poem in " America" proves that it was in many ways a tribute to the land of dreams. McKay viewed America with a utopian lens but found vices in the system. Both his poems harp on the concept of brevity. " America" talks about the end of a great civilization and " If We Must Die" talks about the brevity of the African-Americans who shall wage a war against the " common foe". McKay, as a poet lives in the gray and has two folded emotions for America, because, the poem " America" was written in 1921 and " If We Must Die" was written three years before in 1919. We can then say that McKay underwent a change of heart in those three years and unabashedly started to state both the virtues and vices of the country instead of just abhorring it. Through " America" and " If We Must Die", McKay successfully conveyed the that there can be two sides to every emotion and it is acceptable to not align with either. By juxtaposing love and hate, McKay created a nexus with the African-American Community and found acclaim and recognition. In his prose, McKay emphasized the significance of the common Negro and brought together Negro Renaissance writers for the awakening of Negro traditional culture. But it is for his poetry that McKay will be most considered. For in his poetry, he best articulated the New Negro's resolve to defend his self-respect, ethnic value, and his right to a worthy life.

## Works Cited

Du Bois, W. E. B. 1903. *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches*. Chicago: A. C. McClurn & CO. Print.

Hansell, William H. "Some Themes in the Jamaican Poetry of Claude McKay." *Phylon* (1960-), vol. 40, no. 2, 1979, pp. 123-139.

Adewumi, Samuel I., and Moses B. Kayode. "Thematic Trends in Claude McKay's Selected Poems of the Harlem Era." *International Journal of Education & Literacy Studies*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2014., pp. 15-19.

Gates, Henry L., and Valerie Smith. *The Norton Anthology of African American literature*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2014. Print.

Winston, James. "Becoming the People's Poet: Claude McKay's Jamaican Years, 1889-1912." *Small Axe*, no. 13, 2003., Web. Accessed 22 October 2016

Cooper, Wayne. "Claude McKay and the New Negro of the 1920's" *Modern American Poetry of University of Illinois*. Web. Accessed October 22 2016