

PAL: Perspectives in American Literature - A Research and Reference Guide - An Ongoing Project

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Chapter 9: Claude McKay (1890-1948)

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Primary Works

Two books of dialect verse- *Songs of Jamaica* (1911), *Constab Ballads* (1912)

Novels- *Home to Harlem* (1927), *Banjo* (1929), *Gingertown* (1931), *Banana Bottom* (1933)

Poetry Collections- *Spring in New Hampshire* (1920), *Harlem Shadows* (1922)

Maxwell, William J. ed. *Complete Poems: Claude McKay*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2004.

Autobiography- *A Long Way From Home* (1937)

Sociological Study- *Harlem: Negro Metropolis* (1940)

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| [Top](#) | Claude McKay (1890-1948): A Brief Biography

A Student Project by Jillian Flynn

Claude McKay was born on September 15, 1890 into a large family. His born name was Festus Claudius. His father Thomas Francis, and his mother Hannah Ann Elizabeth Edwards had married in 1870. Hannah gave birth to eleven children, eight of which lived into adulthood. Claude was the youngest of his siblings and grew to be the favorite of his mother. Both of Claude's parents had experienced slavery but they still were able to maintain a comfortable household for their children.

Claude grew up in the mountainous area in Jamaica called Sunny Ville. He describes these surroundings in *My Green Hills of Jamaica* (1979) later on in life. His parents were community leaders and were known as kind and generous people. His mother's nickname was "Mother Mac" because she helped young women around her who had gotten pregnant out of wedlock, even though it was against her morals. His father was the senior deacon at the church they attended. When he was about four years of age, Claude started to attend the school at Mt. Zion at the church he attended. After attending school here for a couple of years, Claude went with his eldest brother Uriah to be taught. Uriah had become a teacher and was thought to be well enough educated to teach his younger brother. This was around the time when Claude would have been between the ages of seven to nine years in age.

Claude loved living with his brother and his wife and learned many things from his brother. He soon began to think of reading as a form of playing. While living with his brother he decided he would become a free thinker like his brother and to learn from experiences. Claude's first attempt at poetry writing was at the age of ten when he wrote for one of his school functions. When he was fourteen he returned home to his parents. In 1906 at the age of sixteen, he went to Kingston to study a trade that could help him get a job. In 1907 an earthquake hit the city of Kingston and he narrowly escaped injury when the walls of his room collapsed in on him. The school had been reduced to a pile of ruins and he was again forced to go back home. When he returned home he became an apprentice to a tradesman of sorts by the name of "Old Brenga". He was his apprentice from 1907 to 1909. While working for Mr. Brenga he met a white man by the name of Walter Jekyll. This man would inspire him over the next five years to become "a creative, productive, and recognized poet" (Cooper 22).

In 1909 Claude's mother began to suffer from dropsy so Claude went back home to be with her and to care for her until her death on December nineteenth of that same year. After her death he went back to Kingston to be by his mentor's side, Walter Jekyll. Walter Jekyll inspired him to write in his native tongue, which seemed vulgar to Claude because of the way it sounded when spoken. While he was in Kingston he joined the constabulary in June of 1911, but didn't even serve a year of his five-year term. Walter Jekyll had helped to get him out of his term so that he could concentrate on his writing.

In 1912 he wrote two volumes of poetry, which were *Songs of Jamaica* (1912) that contained fifty poems, and *Constab Ballads* (1912) that contained twenty-eight poems. During this time he also published poems in the two major newspapers of the island: *Daily Gleaner* and *Jamaica Times*. He had moved back to his hometown of Sunny Ville while writing these poems and had taken up farming for several months where he found it wasn't what suited him. He came to Charleston, South Carolina in the summer of 1912 to attend Tuskegee College at the age of twenty-two to study agriculture. Only staying for a short while, he soon transferred to Kansas State College in Manhattan, Kansas. He

remained here for almost two years under the guardianship of Walter Jekyll who was also his means of support. While at Kansas State the only two subjects that he excelled in were zoology and advanced grammar. Later on in his life he would publish an article in *McClure's Magazine* that Kansas had bored him.

In 1914 Walter Jekyll is thought to have sent Claude a few thousand dollars as a gift so that it would be possible for him to plan a marriage to his sweetheart Eulalie Imelda Lewars. When he received this sum of money, he left Kansas to go to New York to arrange for his wedding to take place. When he arrived in New York, he invested most of his money into becoming a restaurateur. On July 30, 1914 he was married to his bride to be in Jersey City, New Jersey. He was twenty-three years old at this time and she was just a little bit younger. After only a few months his restaurant proved to be a failure. Six months into the New York lifestyle, Eulalie left Claude to go back home to Jamaica. After leaving him she gave birth to their only son Rhue Hope McKay, whom Claude never saw. Later on his wife would try to reunite with her husband, but Claude had dismissed their relationship, and thought of it as a thing of the past.

After his marriage was dissolved he went on to have a love life with partners of both sexes. By the year 1915 he had given up the idea of going back to school and started living by a rebels way of life, doing things by trial and error to find which direction he should go in life. He didn't go back to Jamaica during this time because of his pride and he took on several odd jobs to earn a living. He was involved in the literary rebellion in America at this time. The time period between 1914-1919 was a time for him to gather information for his future novels and poems. His experiences that he had while at the jobs he acquired helped him to gather the information for many of his future works. In October of 1917 *Seven Arts Magazine* published two of his sonnets: "Invocation" and "The Harlem Dancer". He used the pseudonym Eli Edwards, after his mother's maiden name. This publication was the last of this magazine due to some antiwar essays of Randolph Bourne's that had been published in it.

In 1917 he took a job as a dining-car waiter on the Pennsylvania Railroad, and his experiences can be seen in his novel *Home to Harlem* (1928). Throughout his duration as a waiter on the railway, Harlem remained his home base. He also experimented with cocaine and opium, which is also observed in one of the scenes from *Home to Harlem* (1928). In September 1918, *Pearson's Magazine* published five poems and a short autobiographical statement from McKay. Claude left the railroad company sometime in 1919 and took on a factory job for a brief time in New York. In April of this year, *The Liberator* printed his poem "The Dominant White". His friend from *The Liberator*, Max Eastman who was also the publisher, now took the place of Walter Jekyll in his life. In July, *The Liberator* printed seven more poems by McKay that were about war and mob violence. This appearance in the magazine was the beginning of his life as a professional writer.

Claude McKay left for England in the early fall of 1919 and ended up staying for over a year and a half. While he lived in England he went to a club called the International Socialist Club where he learned a lot about the socialist theory. He also met his future wife, Francine Budgen, at an International Socialist Club that he attended. In mid-September, the *Workers' Dreadnought* reprinted a column of McKay's poems from *The Liberator's* July issue. This would help him get recognized in England as a writer. In January 1920, the *Dreadnought* published two more of his poems along with other articles that followed in the months of January, February, and April. Around this time McKay found communism to be to which he could have faith in and could also devote himself to. April would bring the meeting of Sylvia Pankhurst who played a major part in social justice for women. He was a member of Pankhurst's communist sect and saw the realities of international communist politics. These meetings would lead him to doubt in the communist ideas. In June the summer issue of *Cambridge Magazine* published twenty-three sonnets and other short lyrics of McKay's. McKay had become a part of *The Workers' Dreadnoughts* staff, and worked with them from July through November. During this time he wrote twenty-four articles, poems, and reviews in addition to his editorial duties. He also attended the Communist Unity Conferences on July 31 and August 1.

At the end of 1920 he left England and came back to New York. He arrived in New York in the winter of 1921 and worked with *The Liberator*, sharing editorial duties with Floyd Dell and Robert Minos from February until 1922. Around September 20 he left for Russia and stayed there from 1922 until 1923. He went there as a communist representative and was appointed the first black American delegate in congress. He went to Berlin in the summer of 1923. *Crisis* published his account of his trip to Russia. Two publications were made, one in December of 1923 and the other in January of 1924 detailing his account of Russia. There was also a short article that followed these publications in September. While in Russia two works that he had written were translated into Russian: *Sudom Lincha* that consisted of three stories, and the treatise *Negry v America* (Bloom 110). He left Berlin in October and went to Paris where he found out that he had contracted syphilis while in Berlin. He was hospitalized and was released in good health in November 1923. He was part of the expatriate scene while he stayed in Paris. In December he came down with a serious case of influenza while posing nude in some art studios. His stay in Paris lasted from late August 1923 until January 1924. *Crisis* published another article about Claude in April 1924.

McKay became infuriated with Alain Locke when he published one of his poems with a changed title. *The Survey Graphic* published McKay's poem as "White Houses" instead of "The White House". Alain would remain mad at Alain. In the spring of 1926 he landed a job working in a movie studio for Rex Ingrams. He summarized novels that

seemed like good material for conversation in motion pictures. He was also a dancer in *The Garden of Allah*. While working for Rex, he spent a lot of time in Nice associating with people, but was met with a lot of criticism about his race from many of the crewmembers. His novel *Home to Harlem* (1928) was completed by the end of May 1926 but wasn't published until 1928. During this period of his life a man by the name of Aspenwall Bradley handled his business affairs. In 1929 *Banjo* was published. *Banana Bottom's* publication in 1933 was dedicated to his earliest mentor, Walter Jekyll.

In 1934 he returns to the United States where he spends many months in a welfare camp at Camp Greycourt, New York. In 1935 he publishes the essay "Harlem Runs Wild". By 1939 he had held a job with the Federal Writers Project of the Works Progress Administration. In this year he loses that job. He suffers a stroke while working at a federal shipbuilding yard in 1943 and decided to move to Chicago. By this time he has met Ellen Tarry, a Roman Catholic writer and has been very interested in the religion. He is baptized into the Roman Catholic faith on October 11, 1944. In 1948 he died in the city of Chicago. He was buried in New York after a funeral service was held in Harlem. Claude McKay was a man who believed that blacks should have an alliance with the whites, but to also have self-confidence and faith in one another (Cooper 323). Throughout his career as a writer he always struggled to make ends meet, and was always met with someone willing to help. Claude McKay has left his mark as one of the major artists in poetry, of the Harlem Renaissance. After his death, *Selected Poems of Claude McKay* (1953) was published, along with an essay in *Phylon* entitled "Boyhood in Jamaica."

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