McKay, Claude (b. Sept. 15, 1890, Jamaica, British West Indies--d. May 22, 1948, Chicago), Jamaican-born poet and novelist whose *Home to Harlem* (1928) was the most popular novel written by an American black to that time. Before going to the U.S. in 1912, he wrote two volumes of Jamaican dialect verse, *Songs of Jamaica* and *Constab Ballads* (1912).

After attending Tuskegee Institute (1912) and Kansas State Teachers College (1912-14), McKay went to New York in 1914, where he contributed regularly to *The Liberator*, then a leading journal of avant-garde politics and art. The shock of American racism turned him from the conservatism of his youth. With the publication of two volumes of poetry, *Spring in New Hampshire* (1920) and *Harlem Shadows* (1922), McKay emerged as the first and most militant voice of the Harlem Renaissance (q.v.). After 1922 McKay lived successively in the Soviet Union, France, Spain, and Morocco. In both *Home to Harlem* and *Banjo* (1929), he attempted to capture the vitality and essential health of the uprooted black vagabonds of urban America and Europe. There followed a collection of short stories, *Gingertown* (1932), and another novel, *Banana Bottom* (1933). In all these works McKay searched among the common folk for a distinctive black identity.

After returning to America in 1934, McKay was attacked by the Communists for repudiating their dogmas and by liberal whites and blacks for his criticism of integrationist-oriented civil rights groups. McKay advocated full civil liberties and racial solidarity. In 1940 he became a U.S. citizen; in 1942 he was converted to Roman Catholicism and worked with a Catholic youth organization until his death. He wrote for various magazines and newspapers, including the *New Leader* and the New York *Amsterdam News*. He also wrote an autobiography, *A Long Way from Home* (1937), and a study, *Harlem: Negro Metropolis* (1940). His *Selected Poems* (1953) was issued posthumously.