Claude McKay
Poet, novelist
Born September 15, 1889, Sunny Ville, Jamaica
Died May 22, 1948, Chicago, Illinois

“Our Negro newspapers were morbid, full of details of clashes between colored and white, murderous shootings and hangings.... During this time ‘If We Must Die’ exploded in me.”

Claude McKay is best known for his poem “If We Must Die,” in which he calls on his kinsmen to resist oppression. “If we must die, O let us nobly die.” he wrote. “Like men we’ll face the murderous, cowardly pack/Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!”

First published in 1919, the poem was much quoted in the 1960s at the height of the civil rights movement, and it brought a renewed interest in McKay himself, who was the most radical poet of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. Over the years his poetry had fallen out of fashion, but twenty years after his death, his powerful verses against racism swept him back to popularity. McKay’s poems are now found in many anthologies and his three novels are also being read once
more. Like most of his poetry, his prose works focus on the problems and frustrations faced by black people in a white society.

A Jamaican upbringing

Festus Claudius McKay was the youngest of the eleven children of Thomas and Ann (Edwards) McKay. His father, who was descended from the Ashanti people of West Africa, farmed a small plot of land in Sunny Ville, in Jamaica's Clarendon Mountains. Although Africa was far away, it was very much part of McKay's home life, for his father often recounted the folk tales told him by his father. McKay's grandfather had been born in Africa, where he had been seized and taken away as a slave, and McKay heard many stories of the cruelties of slavery. Even as a young child he developed a strong distrust of whites, along with a fierce pride in his African roots.

The boy's distrust of whites did not include Walter Jekyll, an Englishman who had come to Jamaica to study the local folklore. Jekyll encouraged McKay to read poetry and gave him the run of his library. The boy also received encouragement from his schoolteacher brother, Uriah. As a result, he came to know the works of all the major English poets, as well as many other English writers. His early poems reflected their style until Jekyll suggested that instead of imitating the English classics, he should write in the Jamaican dialect.

When McKay was seventeen, he left Sunny Ville to become an apprentice to a cabinetmaker in Brown's Town, but he did not like the work and two years later he moved to Kingston to join the police force. Until he went to Kingston, McKay had always lived in areas where blacks were the majority, but in the capital there were far more whites than blacks, and for the first time in his life he ran up against overt racism. As a policeman, he saw that the people with the darkest skins always received the worst punishments. Similarly, those with the darkest skins had to make do with the worst jobs. McKay stuck it out for almost a year before giving up in disgust and returning home.

* Back in Sunny Ville, he collected together the poems he had been writing, and with Jekyll's help he sent them to England, where they were published as Songs of Jamaica (1911) and Constab Ballads (1912). Both collections were written in dialect. Songs of Jamaica was based on the poet's childhood experiences and showed a great love for the way of life of the average Jamaican. By contrast, the works in Constab Ballads were angry, expressing McKay's hatred of Kingston.

The firebrand poet

Songs of Jamaica won McKay a medal from Jamaica's Institute of Arts and Sciences. He was the first black Jamaican ever to receive this award, and he used the money that came with it to pay for his journey to the United States. Arriving there late in 1912, he enrolled at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, where he studied for two months before moving on to Kansas State College as an agriculture student. Over the next two years, McKay gradually came to the conclusion that he did not want a career in agriculture, and by 1914 he was in New York City, working at various jobs while writing some very strong poetry.
because of recent outbreaks of violence, which had caused many African Americans to fear for their lives. Although he was speaking for black Americans at a particular period in history, the poem has had a universal appeal in that it touches all who are oppressed in any age and in any part of the world. However, when it first came out, the poem found its audience largely among the black community, who hailed McKay as an important new writer.

**Writer and traveler**

The next few years saw McKay publishing two more volumes of poetry, *Spring in New Hampshire* and *Other Poems* (1920) and *Harlem Shadows* (1922), which contains some of his best-known verse. During this period, he spent over a year in Europe before returning to the United States in 1921 to become an associate editor of the *Liberator*. The editor of the *Liberator* was the white Marxist writer Max Eastman, who had been a friend of McKay for some time and had convinced him to become a communist. McKay twice visited Russia and was a guest at the Fourth Congress of the Communist party in 1923, but he became less enthusiastic about communism as the years passed.

By the end of 1923 McKay was in Paris, and he stayed in Europe for the next ten years, living in France, Germany, Spain, and also in Morocco. His three novels, *Home to Harlem* (1928), *Banjo* (1929), and *Banana Bottom* (1933) were written during these years, as was the collection of short stories, *Gingertown* (1932). While all these books did well, *Home to Harlem* was especially successful. Reprinted five times in its first two months, it
was the first novel by a black writer to appear on the bestseller lists.

McKay spent his last years in the United States, and his major work during this period was his autobiography, *A Long Way from Home* (1937). As the book makes clear, he was by then totally disillusioned with communism. Toward the end of his life he became a Roman Catholic, and some of his later poems reflect his religious conversion. Whatever his views, McKay never ceased to compose strong and eloquent poetry. His talent for expressing the feelings of fellow African Americans has assured him a permanent place in American literature.