

Name:

Period:

Claude McKay - "America"
Poem and Comprehension Questions

I. Poem Background

<http://study.com/academy/lesson/claude-mckay-role-in-harlem-renaissance-america-analysis.html>

You do not need to create an account - the first few minutes are sufficient to provide background and context.



II. "America" Claude McKay - 1921

Although she feeds me bread of bitterness,
And sinks into my throat her tiger's tooth,
Stealing my breath of life, I will confess
I love this cultured hell that tests my youth.
Her vigor flows like tides into my blood,
Giving me strength erect against her hate,
Her bigness sweeps my being like a flood.
Yet, as a rebel fronts a king in state,
I stand within her walls with not a shred
Of terror, malice, not a word of jeer.
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.

Read and annotate for literary devices

1. W.E.B. Dubois once said, "One ever feels his twoness, -- an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder." How does his quote connect to "America" by Claude McKay? How might his quote reflect the limitations of freedom in America?

III. "If We Must Die" Claude McKay - 1919

Read, annotate, and complete tracker

If we must die—let it not be like hogs
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
Making their mock at our accursed lot.
If we must die—oh, let us nobly die,
So that our precious blood may not be shed
In vain; then even the monsters we defy
Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!
Oh, Kinsmen! We must meet the common foe;
Though far outnumbered, let us show us brave,
And for their thousand blows deal one deathblow!
What though before us lies the open grave?
Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!

1. Read the given background on "Red Summer" and the 1919 Race Riots. How does that information contribute to your understanding of occasion and purpose?

2. In what ways is Claude McKay's rhetoric in "If We Must Die" similar to that of Patrick Henry's in his "Speech to the Virginia Convention"? What elements and strategies are similar?

3. How might the freedom of speech afforded to whites be different than that of blacks during this time? How does the Harlem Renaissance collect and effectively embody that frustration?

