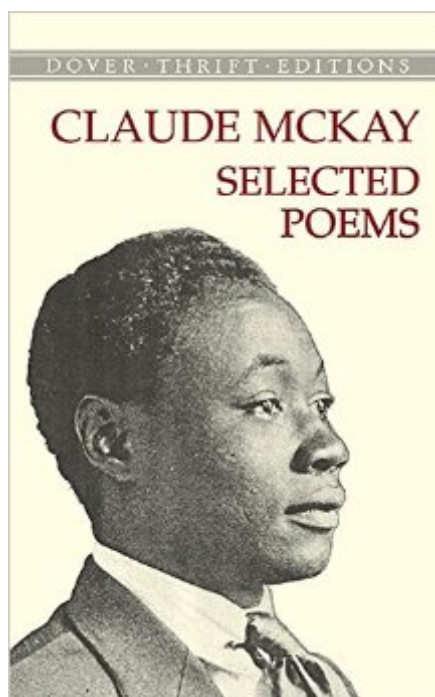


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# Selected Poems (Dover Thrift Editions)



## Synopsis

In his 1918 autobiographical essay, "A Negro Poet Writes," Claude McKay (1889–1948), reveals much about the wellspring of his poetry. "I am a black man, born in Jamaica, B.W.I., and have been living in America for the last years. It was the first time I had ever come face to face with such manifest, implacable hate of my race, and my feelings were indescribable. Looking about me with bigger and clearer eyes I saw that this cruelty in different ways was going on all over the world. Whites were exploiting and oppressing whites even as they exploited and oppressed the yellows and blacks. And the oppressed, groaning under the leash, evinced the same despicable hate and harshness toward their weaker fellows. I ceased to think of people and things in the mass. [O]ne must seek for the noblest and best in the individual life only: each soul must save itself." So wrote the first major poet of the Harlem Renaissance, whose collection of poetry, *Harlem Shadows* (1922), is widely regarded as having launched the movement. But McKay's literary significance goes far beyond his fierce condemnations of racial bigotry and oppression, as is amply demonstrated by the universal appeal of his sonnet, "If We Must Die," recited by Winston Churchill in a speech against the Nazis in World War II. While in Jamaica, McKay produced two works of dialect verse, *Songs of Jamaica* and *Constab Ballads*, that were widely read on the island. In richly authentic dialect, the poet evoked the folksongs and peasant life of his native country. The present volume, meticulously edited and with an introduction by scholar Joan R. Sherman, includes a representative selection of this dialect verse, as well as uncollected poems, and a generous number in standard English from *Harlem Shadows*.

## Book Information

Series: Dover Thrift Editions

Paperback: 64 pages

Publisher: Dover Publications (June 30, 1999)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0486408760

ISBN-13: 978-0486408767

Product Dimensions: 5.2 x 0.2 x 8.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 2.1 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.5 out of 5 stars See all reviews (20 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #159,433 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #29 in Books > Literature &

Fiction > Poetry > Regional & Cultural > Caribbean & Latin American #73 in Books > Literature &

Fiction > African American > Poetry #648 in Books > Literature & Fiction > Poetry > Regional & Cultural > United States

## Customer Reviews

McKay's poetry is brilliant. Sadly, this thrift edition does not do justice to the poet or his work. I look forward to finding a definitive edition of all his poems. Many of his poems, such as "If we must die", are revolutionary. This poem uses a traditional form subversively, conveying a powerful and radical meaning. McKay, in a time when the ultimate taboo is a black man's use of violence against the white institution or individual, contemplates the use of black violent power to obtain what the African-American does not have in America -- equality, justice, etc. The fight may lead to death, but it is a death with dignity. This is just one example of McKay's great poetry. Read it, whether in this edition or another. His poems add great texture, not only to the Harlem Renaissance, but to African-American culture on a whole.

"Selected Poems," by Claude McKay, is a wonderful volume by this noteworthy writer. This Dover edition, which is edited by Joan R. Sherman, includes a bibliography of work by McKay as well as an index of the poems in the book. Sherman's introduction discusses the life and career of McKay, who was born in Jamaica and came to live in the U.S. A novelist and essayist as well, he died in Chicago in 1948. Many of the poems are written in Jamaican dialect. These dialect pieces have an energetic color and musicality. Many poems also show McKay's command of standard literary English; he writes some particularly fine sonnets. Overall, this is a rich, diverse, and technically adept collection. There are many pointedly political poems that condemn racism and economic injustice, as well as sensuous love poems. There are poems that invoke both the rural tropics and the urban north. These poems show McKay to be a master of meter, rhyme, and other aspects of poetry; he uses considerable variety throughout the collection. His best pieces combine a burning passion with his impressive technical prowess. Consider "A Capitalist at Dinner," a cutting political sonnet with a devastating final couplet; or "Song of the New Soldier and Worker," another political piece that uses stunning imagery and masterful audio effects. McKay uses words as both lethal weapons against the forces of injustice and as tender instruments of passionate love. He is a poet of tremendous talent, and this collection is a real treasure.

This book of poems is ABSOLUTELY AMAZING! I purchased this book for a thematic approaches to literature class and it totally blew me away! McKay wording and the imagery that he uses gives

the reader a vivid picture of what McKay is seeing as he writes. These poems are full of emotion and McKay's life experiences. After reading the poems and discussing them in class I would highly recommend this selection. What makes this book even better is that the seller was very fast with shipping and the book was totally affordable!

In Claude McKay's *Selected Poems*, one sees the transformation of this West Indian poet's life manifested in his varied styles. McKay was born in the Jamaican countryside to an elite class, educated and given every opportunity. Then, as a young man, he came to America and felt the sting of pervasive racism and the numbness of being labeled second-class. His work shows that at times he looks down with pity at his people, only to look up with scorn at his oppressors. This duality drives many of his poems, especially those in the book's first section: *Songs of Jamaica*. In "Hard Times" McKay exhibits the range of his poetic voice by ventriloquizing a Jamaican peasant. The effective use of this device brings an undeniably intimate feel to the poem and is remarkably capable of relating the sorrow of the poor farmer depicted. The modification of Jamaican vernacular on the English language is also a portrayal of the West Indian's captivity and adaptation to a strange culture. Not to be overlooked are poems from McKay's *Harlem Shadows* collection. "If We Must Die" reflect his anger at an oppressive white menace that threatens to devour his culture. Interestingly enough, Winston Churchill read the same poem to British troops during WWII in a defiant call to arms. This cross-cultural application surely reflects the broader themes of McKay's work buried in the bowels of racial conflict. All together, McKay's native language echoes through the entire collection and relates a stirring narrative of the struggle of a West Indian exile. Each poem uses language, whether the voice of an island peasant, or an American immigrant, to engage the reader in the poet's struggle; a compelling read.

I first read "If We Must Die" in a Literature class in college. Not knowing anything about Claude McKay, I saw this as an almost "athletic" speech from a coach to his team. It had that kind of a feel to it. In doing some research, I found that McKay was speaking of the injustice African Americans felt in America in the early 1900s. This collection is not just the selections about racial injustice. There are also poems about his home in Jamaica, his job in the constabulary force there, and love. Through these diverse poems, you will get a better picture of McKay and his time. There is not a lot of biographical information listed in this book. I would recommend the book. The first few poems are written in a Jamaican dialect which may make it difficult to read the first time. I found that reading it out loud opened the meaning and pronunciation for me. It is a good read.

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