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# Claude MacKay Describes His Own Life: A Negro Poet

by Claude MacKay

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I am a black man, born in Jamaica, British West Indies, and have been living in America for the last 6 years. During my first year's residence in America I wrote the following group of poems.



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. I sent them so that you may see what my state of mind was at the time. I have written nothing similar to them since and don't think I shall again.

The whites at home constitute about 14 percent of the population only and they generally conform to the standard of English respectability. The few poor ones accept their fate resignedly and live at peace with the natives. The government is tolerant, somewhat benevolent, based on the principle of equal justice to all.

I had heard of prejudice in America but never dreamed of it being so intensely bitter; for at home there is also prejudice of the English sort, subtle and dignified, rooted in class distinction — color and race being hardly taken into account.

It was such an atmosphere I left for America to find here strong white men, splendid types, of better physique than any I had ever seen, exhibiting the most primitive animal hatred towards their weaker black brothers. In the South daily murders of a nature most hideous and revolting; in the North silent acquiescence, deep hate half-hidden under a puritan respectability, oft flaming up into an occasional lynching — this ugly

raw sore in the body of a great nation. At first I was horrified, my spirit revolted against the ignoble cruelty and blindness of it all. Then I soon found myself hating in return; but this feeling couldn't last long for to hate is to be miserable.

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 lash, evinced the same despicable hate and harshness towards their weaker fellows. I ceased to think of people and things in the mass — why should I fight with mad dogs only to be bitten and probably transformed into a mad dog myself? I turned to the individual soul, the spiritual leaders, for comfort and consolation. I felt and still feel that one must seek for the noblest and best in the individual life only: each soul must save itself.

And now this great catastrophe has come upon the world proving the real hollowness of nationhood, patriotism, racial pride, and most of the things which one was taught to respect and reverence.

There is very little to tell of my uneventful career. I was born in the heart of the little island of Jamaica on the 15th of September, 1889. My grandparents were slaves, my parents free-born. My mother was very sweet-natured, fond of books; my father, honest, stern even to harshness, hard working, beginning empty-handed he coaxed a good living from the soil, bought land, and grew to be a comparatively prosperous small settler. A firm believer in education, he tried to give all his 8 children the best he could afford.

I was the last child and when I was 9 years old

my mother sent me to my eldest brother, who was a schoolmaster in the northwestern part of the island.

From that time on I became interested in books. The school building, to which was attached the teacher's cottage, was an old slave house, plain, substantial, and comfortable. My brother, an amateur journalist, country correspondent for the city papers, was fond of good books and possessed a nice library — all the great English masters and a few translations from the ancients. Not caring very much for play and having plenty of leisure I spent nearly all my time out of school reading. I read whatever pleased my fancy, secretly scribbling in prose and verse at the same time. Novels, history, bible literature, tales in verse like Scott's I read, and nearly all Shakespeare's plays for the absorbing story interest. As yet I couldn't perceive the truths. Now, looking back, I can see that that was the great formative period of my life — a time of perfect freedom to play, read, and think as I liked.

I finished elementary school with my brother and helped him to teach while studying further under him. In 1906 I passed an examination for the Government Trade Scholarship and was apprenticed to a wheelwright and cabinet maker. But I couldn't learn a trade.

At this time I began writing verses of Jamaican peasant life in the negro dialect. I met an Englishman who loved good books and their makers more than anything else. He opened up a new world to my view, introduced me to a greater, deeper literature — to Buddha, Schopenhauer and Goethe, Carlyle and Browning, Wilde, Carpenter, Whitman, Hugo, Verlaine, Baudelaire, Shaw, and the different writers of the Rationalist Press — more than I had time to read, but nearly all my spare time I spent listening to his reading choice bits from them, discussing the greatness of their minds, and telling of their lives, which I must confess I sometimes found even more interesting than their works.

Trade proved a failure. I gave it up, joined the Jamaica Constabulary 1910-11, despised it, and left. With Mr. Jekyll's help, the Englishman mentioned before, my *Songs of Jamaica* was published at this time. I went home and farmed rather half-heartedly. The government was then encouraging the younger men to acquire a scientific agricultural education so that it could employ them to teach the peasantry modern ways

of farming. I came to America in 1912 to study agriculture, went to Tuskegee, but not liking the semi-military, machinelike existence there, I left for Kansas State College where I stayed 2 years.

In the summer of 1914 I came to New York with a friend. We opened a little restaurant among our people which also proved a failure because I didn't put all my time and energy into it.

After a while I got married, but my wife wearied of the life in 6 months and went back to Jamaica. I hated to go back after having failed at nearly everything so I just stayed here and worked desultorily — porter, houseman, janitor, butler, waiter — anything that came in handy. The life was different and fascinating and one can do menial work here and feel like a man sometimes, so I didn't mind it.

I am a waiter on the railroad now. Here are a few of my poems.

#### TO THE WHITE FRIENDS

Think ye I am not fiend and savage too?

Think ye I could not arm me with a gun  
And shoot down ten of you for every one  
Of my black brothers murdered, burnt by you?  
Be not deceived, for every deed ye do

I could match — out-match: am I not Afric's son,  
Black of that black land where black deeds are done?

But the Almighty from the darkness drew

My soul and said: Even thou shalt be a light  
Awhile to burn on the benighted earth,  
Thy dusky face I set among the white  
For thee to prove thyself of highest worth;

Before the world is swallowed up in night,  
To show thy little lamp; go forth, go forth!

### THE CONQUEROR

He has battled with Earth:  
He has won;  
Where once there were desert and dearth,  
And jungles untouched by the sun,  
Are altar and field and hearth:  
He has fought the wild earth,  
He has won.

He has conquered the Sea:  
Proud he rides  
Over the long white waves,  
Over the frenzied tides,  
Over the unmarked graves  
Of creatures that fought, as he,  
The great Sea.

And he goes through the Air  
On wings.  
He has won everywhere,  
He has under control  
Earth, Sea, and Air,  
Yea, all things  
But his Soul.

### IS IT WORTH WHILE?

Is it worth while?  
This question ever I ask  
As the eternal mile  
I trudge along.  
Sick of life's thankless task,  
My tongue too leaden for song—  
O God! is it worth while?  
Yet I must go on,  
Though wearily I fare  
Through the valley of despair.  
I must go on and make no moan . . .  
I would lie low in the clean, green grass and sleep,  
In the silent night and deep;  
But I must go, I must go on.  
On through the pushing stream  
Of mortals harsh and proud,  
On through the pushing stream  
Of mortals harsh and proud,  
On through the clamorous crowd  
That dissipates my dream.  
All alone,  
Through the splashing, lashing torrent,  
Along the eternal mile,  
I must go on  
With this thought ever recurrent:  
Is it worth while?

### THE PARK IN SPRING

The vivid grass with visible delight  
Springing triumphant from the pregnant earth;  
And butterflies, and sparrows in brief flight  
Chirping and dancing for the season's birth,  
And dandelions and rare daffodils  
That hold the deep-stirred heart with hands of gold

And thrushes sending forth their joyous trills;  
Not these, not these did I at first behold;  
But, seated on the benches daubed with green,  
The human derelicts, some fast asleep,  
With here and there a woman wedged between,  
And, over all, life's shadows dark and deep:  
Moaning I turned away, for misery  
I have the strength to bear but not to see.

## HARLEM SHADOWS

I hear the halting footsteps of a lass  
In Negro Harlem when the night lets fall  
Its veil. I see the shapes of girls who pass  
Eager to heed desire's insistent call:  
Ah, little dark girls, who in slippered feet  
Go prowling through the night from street to street.

Through the long night until the silver break  
Of day the little gray feet know no rest,  
Through the lone night until the last snow-flake  
Has dropped from heaven upon the earth's white breast,  
The dusky half-clad girls of tired feet  
Are trudging, thinly shod, from street to street.

Ah, stern, harsh world, that in the wretched way  
Of poverty, dishonor and disgrace  
Has pushed the timid little feet of clay,  
The sacred brown feet of my fallen race!  
Ah, heart of me, the weary, weary feet  
In Harlem wandering from street to street.

*Edited by Tim Davenport.*

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