

There is no more tragic pilgrimage in history. Working under unfair conditions, denied his rights of citizenship and education, hounded by race prejudice, the southern Negro listened eagerly to the tales of prosperity and opportunity for his race which flourished in the nearest northern city.

The relation of the Negro and the labor union has been difficult. The percentage of skilled colored labor in East St. Louis is not large and there is no organization for unskilled or common labor. The skilled Negro has felt himself discriminated against by the crafts unions, and to the unskilled or uneducated Negro the purposes of labor organization are obscure.

It is fairly certain that the employers of the large industries gave the preference to colored workers for the reason that they felt these men would be slower to organize than white unskilled laborers would be. If they did undertake to organize, more men could be brought from the South to take their places. Thus, the employer had in his grasp a solution of the problem which from his point of view was quite satisfactory. If the men of his plant went on strike, he ignored the strike, filled their places with Negro workmen, and went on with his business.

It is an interesting fact that one company of Negroes, which was brought up during the strike at the Aluminum Ore Company, refused to accept the positions which had been promised them when they learned that the reason for these jobs being vacant was that their regular occupants were out on strike.

The situation as it existed was deeply unfair to the Negro laborer. Instead of his cause being the cause of the working class at large, the two became separated and pitted against each other, the employer, of course, being on the side of that form of unskilled labor of which he felt he could for the longest period of time take advantage.

It must be remembered that as a background for all of this industrial discontent, the worst of municipal conditions existed. With three men for every one job, with saloons and gambling houses operating on all sides, with an administration which, under Mayor Fred Mollman, winked at any crime as long as it was committed by a friend of those in office, with pawnshops displaying in their windows a variety of fire-arms accompanied by the sign "Buy a Gun for Protection," it is small wonder that eventually every semblance of law and order broke down, resulting in the desperate events of July 2.

In this terrible crisis, the innocent were made to suffer for the guilty. Every instinct of brutality which had been allowed to grow up in East St. Louis sprang full-fledged into expression, and because members of his race who had had no chance for enlightenment had been used as tools in the hands of despotic employers, great numbers of Negroes were burned and shot and persecuted by a fiendish mob which cared nothing for labor principles or for industrial justice,

■ “If We Must Die”

Date: 1919

Author: Claude McKay

Genre: poem

Summary Overview

Claude McKay’s poem is an emblem of the artistic outpouring of the Harlem Renaissance, illuminating the struggles of black people in the United States and contributing to the creation of black cultural identity during this period. As an emigrant from Jamaica, McKay’s work explores racism there and in the United States. In particular, “If We Must Die” demonstrates both the pride and isolation of being black at this historical moment. The poem is also full of rage at the mistreatment of black people and serves as a call to action not only for black people but for other marginalized groups to rise up against their oppressors.

Defining Moment

“If We Must Die” was first published in the monthly socialist magazine *The Liberator* in 1919 and due to its popularity published later that same year in *The Messenger*. The poem’s message proved popular because it resonated with the prejudices experienced by black people during this period. McKay appears to have been reacting to string of violent events during the summer of 1919. The so-called Red Summer witnessed a rise in racist violence against black people in the United States, with white mobs attacking black people across the country.

At the end of World War I, black soldiers returning home were met with racism and violence. Both white and black soldiers competed for jobs and housing as they returned from the war. Economic turmoil followed, and violence soon erupted as various white supremacist groups mobilized against black people. As black soldiers attempted to claim the rights afforded them for their service, unemployment became rampant. Because black workers were often manipulated into being strikebreakers, white workers viewed them skeptically. This skepticism soon morphed into hatred and violence, as fears of Communist and socialist influence in the black community grew following the 1917 Bolshevik revolution in Russia.

Antiblack violence erupted in the form of riots in numerous cities across the country. In Washington, D.C., four days of violence resulted in the deaths of fifteen people because of police inaction, and in Chicago, dozens were killed in mob violence with hundreds of others displaced from their homes. This violence extended beyond cities, with attacks directed at black sharecroppers in rural Arkansas around the town of Elaine.

Author Biography

Claude McKay (1889-1948) was a prominent figure of Harlem Renaissance. A native of Jamaica, McKay moved to the United States in 1912 and his fiction and poetry depict the nature of black life in both locations. His work is a celebration of black life that illuminated the struggles of urban black people as well as Jamaican peasant farmers. McKay gained notoriety after his work began to be published more widely in 1917. Originally published in 1919, “If We Must Die” was included in the collected volume *Harlem Shadows*, which solidified McKay’s role as a key member of the social movements happening in Harlem and across the United States at this time. His later novels depict the black individual’s experience and black exploitation in urban life (most notably in *Home to Harlem*, published in 1928). McKay spent his later years writing abroad before moving to Chicago in the 1940s where he devoted his time to a new interest in Catholicism.

other gauntlets to run. The question of importance to him as to all workers was, “as a result of all of N.R.A.’s maneuvers will I be able to buy more?” The answer has been “No.” A worker cannot eat a wage rate. To determine what this wage rate means to him we must determine a number of other factors. Thus rates for longshoremen seem relatively high. But when we realize that the average amount of work a longshoreman receives during the year is from ten to fifteen weeks, the wage rate loses much of its significance. When we add to that fact the increase in the cost of living—as high as 40 per cent in many cases—the wage rate becomes even more chimerical. For other groups of industrial workers increases in cost of living, coupled with the part time and irregular nature of the work, make the results of N.R.A. negligible. In highly mechanized industries speed-up and stretch-out nullify the promised result of N.R.A. to bring increased employment through shorter hours. For the workers are now producing more in their shorter work periods than in the longer periods before N.R.A. There is less employment. The first sufferer from fewer jobs is the Negro worker. Finally the complete break-down of compliance machinery in the South has cancelled the last minute advantage to Negro workers which N.R.A.’s enthusiasts may have claimed.

The Agricultural Adjustment Administration has used cruder methods in enforcing poverty on the Negro farm population. It has made violations of the rights of tenants under crop reduction contracts easy; it has rendered enforcement of these rights impossible. The reduction of the acreage under cultivation through the government rental agreement rendered unnecessary large numbers of tenants and farm laborers. Although the contract with the government provided that the land owner should not reduce the number of his tenants, he did so. The federal courts have now refused to allow tenants to enjoin such evictions. Faced with this Dred Scott decision against farm tenants, the A.A.A. has remained discreetly silent. Farm laborers are now jobless by the hundreds of thousands, the conservative government estimate of the decline in agricultural employment for the year 1934 alone being a quarter of a million. The larger portion of these are unskilled Negro agricultural workers—now without income and unable to secure work or relief.

But the unemployment and tenant evictions occasioned by the crop reduction policies of the A.A.A. is not all. For the tenants and sharecroppers who were retained on the plantations the government’s agricultural program meant reduced income. Wholesale fraud on tenants in the payment of parity checks occurred. Tenants complaining to the Department of Agriculture in Washington have their letters referred back to the locality in which they live and trouble of serious nature often results. Even when this does not happen, the tenant fails to get his check. The remainder of the land he tills on shares with his landlord brings him only the most meagre necessities during the crop season varying from three to five months. The rest of the period for him and his family is one of “root hog or die.”

brought to Brooklyn at the start of the 1947 season. In his first year as a Dodger, he hit .297, scored 125 runs, and led the league in stolen bases (29). The Dodgers won their first pennant since 1941, and Robinson was named Rookie of the Year. In 1949 he was named the league's Most Valuable Player. An athlete of outstanding physical skill and one of the game's most aggressive competitors, Robinson helped lead the Dodgers to six World Series appearances in ten years. He finished his career, in 1956, with a .311 lifetime batting average. He was elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1962.

In his later years Robinson became a leading symbol and spokesperson for the developing civil rights movement. He also worked with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and promoted "black capitalism" as a member of the Republican Party. By the late 1960s, however, Robinson had become disillusioned with both professional baseball and American society. His 1972 memoir, *I Never Had It Made*, lamented the nation's failure to fully realize civil rights. He died that same year.



Historical Document

Loving v. Virginia

Mr. Chief Justice Warren delivered the opinion of the Court

This case presents a constitutional question never addressed by this Court: whether a statutory scheme adopted by the State of Virginia to prevent marriages between persons solely on the basis of racial classifications violates the Equal Protection and Due Process Clauses of the Fourteenth Amendment. For reasons which seem to us to reflect the central meaning of those constitutional commands, we conclude that these statutes cannot stand consistently with the Fourteenth Amendment.

In June 1958, two residents of Virginia, Mildred Jeter, a Negro woman, and Richard Loving, a white man, were married in the District of Columbia pursuant to its laws. Shortly after their marriage, the Lovings returned to Virginia and established their marital abode in Caroline County. At the October Term, 1958, of the Circuit Court of Caroline County, a grand jury issued an indictment charging the Lovings with violating Virginia's ban on interracial marriages. On January 6, 1959, the Lovings pleaded guilty to the charge and were sentenced to one year in jail; however, the trial judge suspended the sentence for a period of 25 years on the condition that the Lovings leave the State and not return to Virginia together for 25 years. He stated in an opinion that:

“Almighty God created the races white, black, yellow, malay and red, and he placed them on separate continents. And but for the interference with his arrangement there would be no cause for such marriages. The fact that he separated the races shows that he did not intend for the races to mix.”

After their convictions, the Lovings took up residence in the District of Columbia. On November 6, 1963, they filed a motion in the state trial court to vacate the judgment and set aside the sentence on the ground that the statutes which they had violated were repugnant to the Fourteenth Amendment. The motion not having been decided by October 28, 1964, the Lovings instituted a class action in the United States District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia requesting that a three-judge court be convened to declare the Virginia antimiscegenation statutes unconstitutional and to enjoin state officials from enforcing their convictions. On January 22, 1965, the state trial judge denied the motion to vacate the sentences, and the Lovings perfected an appeal to the Supreme Court of Appeals of Virginia. On February 11, 1965, the three-judge District Court continued the case to allow the Lovings to present their constitutional claims to the highest state court.