

# Old Aesthetics, New Ethics: Claude McKay's Socially Engaged (Proletarian) Sonnets<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The depiction of the class struggle features prominently in the American canon of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, the emphasis has been almost exclusively on prose fiction to the exclusion of the works of poets such as Claude McKay, one of the central figures of the early Harlem Renaissance and the leading figure among socially engaged English-speaking poets at the time. The article redresses this imbalance by drawing attention to McKay's socially engaged sonnets, which helped to expand the horizons and culturally empower the exploited poor in America (and by extension the proletariat in England) to resist and overcome racist ideology in their common struggle for universal social justice. McKay makes use of a traditional, highly aestheticized sonnet form, while giving it a new ethical premise and fresh impetus.

**Keywords:** Claude McKay, sonnet, class struggle, capitalism, racism

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## INTRODUCTION

The depiction of class struggle occupies a prominent place in the American canon of the first half of the 20th century. Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1905), Louis Adamic's *The Dynamite* (1931), John Dos Passos's *The Big Money* (1936) and John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) are considered the most outstanding novels on the topic, and continue to be accorded central attention in this genre. However, little or no attention is given today to equally intriguing and groundbreaking achievements by poets in this regard, and notably Claude McKay (1889–1948), a central figure among socially engaged poets of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century's turbulent and testing times. His engaging poetic works of social analysis and protest are not listed as part of the American canon, with the occasional exception of just one of his many landmark sonnets, "If We Must Die". This is even more ironic, considering that McKay's poetic career peaked between 1917 and 1923 when he wrote his most revolutionary sonnets of social protest, which in turn not only marked the onset of the so-called New Negro movement and paved the way for the Harlem Renaissance in the US, but also triggered a revolution in poetic and editorial circles engaged with the class struggle on both sides of the Atlantic, specifically in New York and London (Tolson 290; James 231–275). Here socially progressive and revolutionary-minded literati gathered round such central socialist magazines of the time as *Pearsons' Magazine* and *The Liberator* in New York, and *Workers' Dreadnought* in London. These also became McKay's own venues for the publication of his most important, groundbreaking poems of social protest. Moreover, shortly after the first publication of his politically engaged sonnets, McKay was also given the post of co-editor and even executive editor at some of these magazines in both New York and London, the first black (socialist) poet in such a role (James 216, 317). This signalled a major turn in the politics of these key English-language journals and magazines of avantgarde socialist movements, notably those of Sylvia's Pankhurst's *Workers' Dreadnought* (Brown 33, Donlon n. pg.). Under Pankhurst's editorship and in close collaboration with McKay, the depiction and understanding of the class struggle in *Workers' Dreadnought* began to include the problematization of the constructs of race and imperialism, which helped revolutionize the Western anglophone literary socialist movement from within. As a result, this movement became more inclusive and more responsive to the demands for global social justice, which now rested also on the problematization of the imperialist agendas of Western capitalist states and their constructs of racialized otherness (James 283, 289). It became more attuned to the understanding of the role of racist ideology, which capitalist anglophone elites put in place and encouraged by funding racist pseudo-sciences to justify the subjugation and dispossession of colonized peoples in Africa and Asia, and which these very

same ownership elites with the help of their media outlets wielded as a formidable instrument of power on their home turfs to viciously divide the working class and destroy its united front (Brown 33, McKible 58).

McKay, who was born in Jamaica where he received a classical education, came to the USA in 1912 to study at an agricultural college (Pedersen n. pg.). Shellshocked by the virulent institutional racism he experienced all over America, he decided to drop out of college to dedicate himself to writing poetry as part of the social struggle against “racial and economic inequities” (Poetry Foundation). His aim was to help to “forge through art a new [or more heightened] social and political awareness” (Helbling 51). McKay himself, of course, experienced racially motivated economic exploitation first hand. Despite his Jamaican origins, he was recategorized as an “African American” and relegated to the serving underclass of the urban super-exploited, which is how he came to know “his Aframerica”. Or as he writes in his memoirs: “It was not until I was forced down among the rough body of the great serving class of Negroes that I got to know my Aframerica” (qtd. in James 218). Elsewhere, he writes: “I waded through the muck and the scum” by having to take on the lowest-paid manual jobs African Americans were limited to, ranging from being a janitor, porter, and barman to a waiter on trains. In other words, McKay made his living “in every one of the ways the northern [African Americans] do, from pot-wrestling in a boarding-house kitchen to dining-car service on the New York and Washington express” (qtd. in James 218). Out of this experience he emerged as an “African American worker-intellectual” with an acute interest in the “US race relations and the labour movement” (Maxwell xxxi). Unlike many middle-class African American intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance, McKay avoided the trappings of essentialist identity politics that artificially atomizes people into separate, supposedly inherently distinct groups, eventually pitting them against each other. As a socialist, McKay therefore could not and would not write from the simplistic, reductionist and myopic “perspective of a Black person in a white man’s world”, which obscures systemic inequalities and their structural roots. Instead, he opted to write from “the perspective of the Black working class, the Black poor, the Black ‘masses,’ in a racist and class-stratified society” (James 218).

For this purpose, McKay single-handedly both revived and modernized the old, fixed form of the sonnet, changing its subject matter and content to make it fit for the discussion of burning socio-economic and political issues of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the place of Renaissance lovers’ introspective lamentations over unrequited love, and the Romantic poets’ self-centred preoccupation with their self-accorded status of a solitary, creative genius divorced from the realities of the world, he put the downtrodden and the oppressed. As noted by critics, McKay’s choice of the sonnet as his main poetic “medium of expanded radical

communication" (Maxwell xxxii) was not accidental, but was "specifically selected to illustrate the poet's political agenda" (Keller 451). McKay deliberately infused the highly aestheticized form of the sonnet with a new political perspective and mode of engagement, marked by social realism and class antagonism. In this way he could take advantage of the sonnet's highly delineated argumentative structure and use it as a compact form of argument against the social and economic inequalities generated by the capitalist order, an order based on systemic exploitation "amplified by racial discrimination" (Miller n. pg.). The very fact that McKay chose to rely on the sonnet as his instrument of social analysis and political agitation – a highly aestheticized but, crucially, also an internationally widely recognized form of poetic expression since the Renaissance – allowed him to perform a number of feats. McKay's strategic adoption of the sonnet opened the doors to his political message and searing social analysis not only among his targeted audience, and thus socialist revolutionary circles of all kinds, but also among "sonnet-fanciers" coming from more affluent classes that otherwise would never be drawn to the cause (Maxwell xvi). And crucially, the highly aestheticized and internationally highly regarded sonnet allowed him to more easily cross not only class but also national boundaries. The internationally recognized and celebrated sonnet form made it easier for his political message to travel and transcend national borders (Maxwell xxxvi). It enabled him to take his meticulously delineated arguments against the capitalist order and its institutionally embedded racism – with the accompanying clarion call for a new, systemic form of social justice based upon the destruction of the exploitative order exacerbated by racist ideology – across the continents of America and Europe, all the way to Russia, in one sweeping wave. The instant popularity of his landmark protest sonnet "If We Must Die" on both sides of the Atlantic proved to be the case in point.

## UNWAVERING FIDELITY TO THE (BLACK) PROLETARIAN CLASS<sup>2</sup>

"If We Must Die" grew out of the Red Summer of 1919, a time marked by social unrest and so-called "race riots" instigated by racist white mobs in the USA in the aftermath of WWI. The Red Summer draws its name from the brutal "political repression of leftists and the bloody suppression of black rebellion" against structural inequalities and systemic, institutional injustices (Foley vii). This wave of repression underlined the preparations of the USA elites to enter WWI in 1917, and climaxed in the summer of 1919 in the midst of an economic recession.

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2 The subtitle is an adaptation of Maxwell's "fidelity to a changeable black working class" (xiii).

McKay wrote "If We Must Die" in direct response to white racist mobs attacking African Americans all over the US, especially in the industrial centres of the north, and headed by organized paramilitaries, who were politically supported and well-funded by prominent local business groups and politicians (Abu-Lughod 61, 65; Whitaker n. pg.). It also refers to the rebellion of African Americans against racially charged and economically motivated pogroms against their ghettoized proletarian communities, who were to function as scapegoats for the social ills brought about by massive layoffs, rising unemployment and harsher living conditions in the specific socio-political context of the American post-WWI economic meltdown. It is therefore historically inaccurate and ideologically misleading to claim, as some popular accounts do nowadays, that McKay's sonnet "does not specifically reference any group of people" and that its subject matter represents a general rebellion against unspecified oppression ("If We Must Die"). This goes to show that understanding and being able to "reconstruct the social, political and economic context that contributes to the formation of art work" (Keller 447) and informs its content is of pivotal importance for the analysis of socially engaged, protest poetry, including McKay's. The author himself sheds light on the birth of this landmark sonnet in his own memoirs, giving it a firm socio-historical and class-informed foundation: "Among my new poems there was a sonnet 'If We Must Die' . . . The World War had ended. But its end was a signal for the outbreak of little wars between labor and capital and, like a plague breaking out in sore places, between colored folk and white. [...] 'If We Must Die' exploded out of me. And for it the Negro people unanimously hailed me as a poet" (qtd. in Fisher 32). To understand the significance of this sonnet in McKay's career and the people and circumstances that it addresses directly, it is of paramount importance to first delineate the socio-economic context and the role of racial discrimination in the class-stratified and highly polarized American society of the time.

The entry of the USA into WWI created an acute labour shortage in the industrial north. This was due to the conscription of nearly five million men into the American army and an almost complete cessation of labour migration from Europe, which dropped from 1.2 million to less than 20,000 per year (James 243). At the same time, industrial centres stepped up production to meet the needs of the war machine. The combination of these three factors resulted in an insatiable demand for industrial labour, which was recruited from the Deep South. Nearly 1.5 million African Americans migrated from the south during WWI to fill the vacant posts in the steel, meatpacking, textile and other industries, while still representing only a fraction of all labour that emigrated from the south to the north at this time (*ibid.*). Despite this, white-owned media outlets worked hard to stoke and embed racial antagonism, keeping the focus solely on African American migrants so that they would later be targeted as the main reason for the massive

unemployment of demobilized white soldiers. The *Chicago Tribune* reported on the arrival of African Americans from the south with overtly racist titles such as “Half a Million Darkies from Dixie Swarm to the North to Better Themselves” (qtd. in Abu-Lughod 55). After WWI ended, African Americans lost industrial jobs on a massive scale both as a result of the ensuing economic recession and as they made way for returning white soldiers, while demobilized black soldiers became unemployed or were “demoted” to the worst paid jobs of a servant underclass (James 236; Abu-Lughod 56). In Chicago alone, almost 15,000 African American workers were dismissed overnight in the midst of an economic recession and then never rehired (Abu-Lughod 58). The deep post-war economic crisis due to the shutting down of industry geared to the war effort provided the macro framework for the ensuing racial violence, which was stirred up as a decoy precisely when “labour strife and fears of joblessness combined to make white ethnic labor more militant and blacks less accepting of their reduced status” (Abu-Lughod 56). This also led to more organized attempts on the part of African Americans to unionize as well, and, in the midst of a deepening economic crisis, America flared up in a wave of racial violence unleashed by racist white mobs headed by paid paramilitaries and heavily protected by white law enforcement units. African Americans were left defenceless. One of the worst atrocities during the Red Summer took place in Elaine (Arkansas) in September 1919, when a group of African American sharecropping peasants attempted to establish a union in response to their worsening exploitation. The retaliation of the white landowners was brutal. What followed was “one of the worst racial massacres in American history” as federal troops aided by racist gangs indiscriminately “gunned down more than one hundred [black] men, women and children” and “arrested more than three hundred black farmers, and in trials that lasted only a few hours, all-white juries sentenced twelve of the union leaders to die in the electric chair” (Whitaker n. pg.). Chicago, where the most prolonged race attacks of the Red Summer took place between August 27 and September 8, and which resulted in the death of 38 people (23 black) and in 537 injured people, shared a similar fate (James 234). Racist paramilitaries in the employ of a notorious Democratic politician first carried out incursions into black ghettos to beat black people and incite violence, then moved their operations into the vicinity of the stockyards to intercept black workers on their way to work and stone them to death, and then moved in on black residential areas to kill indiscriminately (Abu-Lughod 61). The White fascist section of America, as put by McKay later in another sonnet (“Look Within”), went on a rampage, lynching and burning African Americans alive including pregnant women, and torching down entire African-American communities in their hundreds and thousands. This is what McKay captured in his ironically titled sonnet “Roman Holiday”, published alongside “If We Must Die” in the same July



1919 issue of *The Liberator*. But this time, fascist white America encountered resistance. Emboldened and organized by returning war veterans who had nothing to lose, black communities organized their own system of defence since protection was being withheld by the law enforcement authorities (James 236; Abu-Lughod 56). For the very first time poor, proletarian Black America fought back, saving the lives of many of its own while exacting an eye-for-an-eye revenge and causing many deaths among its surprised assailants. For once the death toll in the history of America's race riots was roughly the same on both sides.

It is precisely this self-assertiveness and militant need to fight back rather than acquiesce in victimization that McKay's sonnet "If We Must Die" extols and literally demands of the oppressed proletarian black America. Published in the 1919 July edition of *The Liberator*, an American labour magazine, "If We Must Die" reads as follows:

Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,  
 While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,  
 Making their mock of our accursed lot.  
 If we must die, O 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!  
 O kinsmen! we must meet the common foe!  
 Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,  
 And for their thousand blows deal one death-blow!  
 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!

(McKay 177-178)

In this groundbreaking political sonnet, McKay gives rise to a new conscience and self-awareness of black proletarian America. It signals the emergence of the "militant New Negro" for whom "death is preferable to a state halfway between slavery and freedom" (James 249). The bravery of the persecuted, cornered by a "mad", howling crowd of lynchers, bestows them with dignity as they face and defy their enemy. Only by resisting and fighting back as a single body, thus demonstrating their humanity, can they die a noble death, earning themselves due respect. The sonnet functions as a metaphor for other bigger, systemic fights. By insisting on defiance rather than submission to the political-economic order of systemic exploitation and institutional racism that spawns pogroms, lynchings and the live

burnings of victims, McKay does away with the old tropes of enduring perseverance and quiet acceptance of racial discrimination along with one's assigned class position as found in mainstream literature, typified by *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (James 238). Instead, the poet injects the traditional sonnet with "the focused anger of the modern Negro" (Maxwell xix), who actively protests and fights against the dehumanizing effects of systemic exploitation, where institutional racism functions as one of the operating mechanisms of super-exploitation. It does so by striking a fundamental blow to the Eurocentric narrative of white supremacy and civility that lies at the heart of America, smashing it to smithereens. In the process of building up the crescendo, McKay systematically implodes the racist constructs of animality and savagery attributed to African Americans, invented on the basis of pseudo-science in order to establish imaginary racialized differences and hierarchies of humanity and nonhumanity, of entitlement and deprivation. The sonnet strikes back by showing that the characteristics of animality and bestiality used to strip racialized others of reason and humanity in fact define and reproduce those who claim to be the bearers and guardians of "White Civilization" and American democracy. A lack of reason, cannibalism and monstrosity inform a white capitalist America that systematically devours its racialized and exploited others, with its elites and their proxies acting like "a pack of mad and hungry dogs" whose intent is "murderous" and their behaviour "cowardly". The sonnet strikes back at the core of supremacist ideology, by "humanizing the hunted African Americans, while bestializing those who hunt them down" (Fisher 33). As Lee shows, this is intimately tied to the structure of the sonnet "If We Must Die", which formally resembles an English sonnet, but in terms of argument development functions as an Italian sonnet, with a volta or shift in focus occurring at the beginning of the eighth line marked by the exclamation "O kinsmen" (Lee 216). If at the beginning the oppressed are dehumanized and treated like pigs sent to slaughter, whose life is objectified and reduced to food for hounds, the tables have turned by the end of the octave. The brave fight of those marked as racialized others humanizes them, and the exclamation "O kinsmen" finally extricates the oppressed from the bestial imagery. The oppressors on the other hand are left behind as they become further entangled and mired in bestial imagery. They begin as dogs only to evolve into individual monsters and finally back into a pack of hungry, mad, murderous dogs. Or as Lee puts it, the oppressors "devolve from superiority to parity to a mere 'pack' of beastly monsters... Though 'they' may ultimately win the battle, metaphorically 'they' have lost it" (217). The façade of white capitalist America's civility and its questionable democracy has come undone, with its true bestial nature fully disclosed by its own devices.

This way of undermining the official white master's discourse and exposing the real face of capitalist white America is a common pattern in McKay's sonnets. He



skilfully turns the dehumanizing constructs of racialized otherness against their originator, disrobing white capitalist America of its cloak of imagined civility. In his sonnets he erodes the official discourse of America being the land of the free, the land of opportunity, and the cradle of democracy. Instead, he shows it to be the land in which the majority of people are in chains and struggle to survive, a struggle made all the more severe by institutional racism, which “imperial” America (McKay 144) exports elsewhere in its expansionist quest for new territories, resources and spheres of economic and political influence. In his sonnet titled “To the White Fiends” and written in 1918 amidst escalating lynchings, McKay once again undermines and reverses the racist stereotypes that associate racialized others, specifically African Americans, with darkness, violence, and depravity. In the racist imagination, African Americans are supposedly capable of carrying out unimaginably unimaginable, bloody deeds on a scale beyond comprehension, which testifies to their bestiality and lack of humanity. If this is indeed true, McKay implicitly asks why it is that there are no pogroms committed against white people by black people, reminding his “white fiends” that the entire USA has been consumed in the fires of racial hatred, and is soaked through and through with the blood of African Americans who have perished at burning stakes and from the blows of fists and clubs of enraged, white fascist crowds, themselves operating under the approving and protective eye of America’s state apparatus. By adopting an ironically threatening voice in the opening stanza, he plays with these racist constructs that associate African-Americans with violence and aggression, reminding white capitalist America of its own state-endorsed violence and genocidal policies against its super-exploited minorities: “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?” (McKay 132). The speaker goes on to point out that despite his “dusky” face he is the embodiment of “light”, while the “white” America along with its establishment wallows in darkness. He with his “dusky” face is the one who can truly demonstrate cultural superiority over the “vulgar and violent” white America, precisely by channelling his energy into creating refined works of art that call for “social and economic equality” (Keller 452), thus spreading a new light, a new direction for America’s oppressed and dispossessed. The exploited and racially oppressed continue to knock on the doors of the American establishment in vain, for it feeds itself on their work, their sweat, and their blood, which it racially stirs and heats to the boiling point. In the sonnet titled “The White House”, which is a metonymy for the American political establishment, McKay writes: “Your door is shut against my tightened face, / And I am sharp as steel with discontent; / But I possess the courage and grace/To bear my anger proudly and unbent: / ... Against the poison of your deadly hate!” (148-149). As noted by Keller, the speaker evokes his struggle to keep his rage under control

in the face of racial segregation and “exclusion from prosperity and affluence, signified by the closed door of the white house” (454). In the end he manages to retain his civility by graciously keeping in check the urge to resort to violent actions in response to severe deprivation, hunger and institutional mistreatment, while “the white power structure, having no provocation at all, constantly succumbs to brutality against minorities” (Keller 454).

By resorting to the very same method, the poet in a number of his sonnets also exposes the double stance and hypocrisy of the American white capitalist establishment that whitewashes the contradictions inherent in its involvement in the First and Second World Wars, painting it as a humanitarian, philanthropic intervention to safeguard world democracy, while stifling any real democracy on its home territory. Here, it continues to perpetuate state-endorsed violence, racially motivated persecution as well as discrimination against those whom it dehumanizes, echoing the very atrocities the American establishment ironically claims to be fighting against on foreign soil. McKay points his accusing finger at these pretences of the American capitalist establishment and its façade of democracy in the sonnet “A Roman Holiday”, which references WWI, and again in his two later sonnets referencing WWII. He opens “A Roman Holiday” with a quatrain that refers to the lynchings of 1917 and 1918, the “holocaustal year[s]” (Tolson 290) for African Americans in the USA: “Tis but a modern Roman holiday; / Each state invokes its soul of bases passion, / Each vies with each to find the ugliest way / To torture Negroes in the fiercest fashion”, and finishes it ironically with the couplet: “Bravo Democracy! Hail greatest Power / That saved sick Europe in her darkest hour!” (McKay 137). The claims of the USA capitalist elite to be fighting for world democracy during WWII and acting as a self-appointed humanitarian crusader against injustices and oppressions facing humanity are also seized upon, problematized and shown to be rendered bogus in “Look Within”. Here, McKay opens the sonnet by exclaiming “Lord, let me not be silent while we fight in Europe Germans ... While fifteen million Negroes on their knees / Pray for salvation from the Fascist yoke of these United States” (253). This leads him to conclude that the American establishment puts up a public show to deceive the world and justify its meddling in other countries’ affairs by pretending to be “uncorrupt of sin / While worm-infested, rotten through within!” (253).

McKay strikes another blow to America’s public image as a bastion of democracy in his sonnet “The Tyger”, in which he shreds the image of humanitarian America, attacking it as deceptive and false in the wider political and economic context. Defiled by its own institutional, anti-humanitarian policies and practices that reproduce a class- and race-stratified society, capitalist America does not export democracy and human rights but systemic exploitation and structural inequalities, further exacerbated by racialized othering and discrimination. To drive

this point home, McKay, as noted by Keller, “figuratively transforms the stripes of the American flag into the stripes of a predatory tiger that destroys African Americans both spiritually and physically” (Keller 449). The political systems created or imposed by America abroad cannot but result in a similar pattern of governance: “Europe and Africa and Asia wait / the touted New Deal of the New World’s hand! / New systems will be built on race and hate, / the Eagle and the Dollar will command” (McKay 378). McKay evokes racial discrimination driven by the economic exploitation of African Americans to ask, as noted by Keller, “how the cruel and bloodthirsty tiger” could possibly “nurture ‘new systems’ that are neither political and economic predators [themselves], nor objects of exploitation” (449). The answer is that it cannot and will not, as further noted by Keller: “The American power structure, victorious in war, can [misleadingly] portray itself as a model for social equality while [all the time] expanding its influence and multiplying the objects of its economic and political exploitation” (449). That is why McKay seeks and finds a solution in socialism and the internationalism of the proletariat, dispossessed class (James 315). Only by reaching out and beyond the prison houses of racist and oppressive capitalist nation states can the dispossessed proletariat of all stripes and colours create a much-needed united front and offer a meaningful resistance not only to racism and class oppression on the home soil of their own imperialist Western countries, but also against the wider “colonialism, segregation, and oppression” (Poetry Foundation) inherent in the exploitative global capitalist system. The answer to black proletarian empowerment does not lie in separate, race-based organizations, but in their inclusion in larger labour social justice movements (Nickels 3), which in turn calls for the restructuring of workers’ grassroot organizations that should open up to the needs of racialized others, following the trail-blazing role of the American IWW (Industrial Workers of the World) union. Only through their common effort free of the white master’s racist ideology can they succeed in their local and global struggle for systemic change.

## CONCLUSION

McKay’s message was taken on board by avantgarde socialist literary circles. It is no surprise then that “If We Must Die” was instantly reprinted by a number of socialist magazines including Sylvia Pankhurst’s *Workers’ Dreadnought* in London, where it appeared in September 1919, and crucially side by side with another of McKay’s sonnets, “The Tired Worker”. In this McKay highlights the repetitive cycle of drudgery caused by extremely long working hours that exhaust the bodies and destroy the minds of oppressed labourers, leaving them too tired to be able to get enough sleep let alone to organize and rise up against structural inequalities:

“O whisper, o my soul! The afternoon / Is waning into evening, whisper soft! / ... / Be patient, weary body, soon the night will wrap thee gently in her sable sheet, / And with a leaden sight thou wilt invite / To rest thy tired hands and aching feet.” (McKay 173). But such much needed rest is nowhere to be found or indeed is cut short for those who are condemned to toiling all day long for others in exchange for poverty wages: “O dawn! O dreaded dawn! O let me rest / Weary my veins, my brain, my life! Have pity! / No! Once again the harsh, the ugly city.” (173). After his arrival in London in the autumn of 1919, McKay, together with Pankhurst as an editor of *Workers’ Dreadnought* where he published his most revolutionary sonnets, made it a point to carefully alternate between sonnets that dealt with class and race issues (James 252), weaving together two seemingly distinct topics into a larger, conceptually harmonious whole. The point of this strategy was to show time and time again that race issues are not and must not be treated as separate from class issues.

The situation that McKay encountered in England, and specifically in London among dock workers, was indeed no different from that in the US. Not only did unemployment skyrocket in the aftermath of WWI but so did the costs of living, while the wages of those still employed stagnated. Prices of food and clothing “tripled” or even “quadrupled”, while the rents went up nearly 50% (James 343). This made it impossible for the working classes to make ends meet, even by taking out loans. The “panacea” to systemic poverty offered by the propertied elite was to plant the seeds of racial hatred and stir up racially motivated antagonism against blacks and other racialized minorities with the help of the newspapers they owned. Mainstream English newspapers started running articles that accused black and Asian workers, especially those looking for work in the docks, of being a sexual threat to white English women, and unwelcome competition to white men in soliciting women forced into prostitution. The newspapers owned by the propertied elite laced the content of their articles with racist constructs of the uncontrolled sexuality and predatory sexual appetites supposedly typical of non-white men (Brown 34). Such tactics were intended to divert attention from social ills and suppress social unrest, and they were effective. They resulted in racially motivated attacks and in stabbings of blacks and other non-whites in English ports by demobilized white soldiers and the unemployed, which led to numerous deaths, particularly in the London docks during the “English red summers” of 1918 and 1919 (James 279). In one of his articles published in *Workers’ Dreadnought*, McKay commented:

“... a Harmsworth-Northcliffe news-sheet [...] its posters all over London: CHINATOWN SCANDAL. WHITE GIRLS AND YELLOW MEN. [...] Mr. Cairns and *The Evening News* had turned the trick. For the first time in

many hopeless weeks, the jobless dockers and seamen would forget their hunger to vent wrath on the Chinamen and the other coloured elements in Poplar [a neighbourhood west of the docks, where many dockers lived].” (Qtd. in Brown 43–44)

McKay draws attention to the kind of action that an antiracist and socially enlightened working-class should have undertaken instead of falling into the racist trap set up by the mainstream media, controlled or owned by the ruling wealthy: “the dockers” ... should [instead] turn their attention to the huge stores of wealth along the water front” (qtd. in Brown 43). That is where “the country’s riches” were hoarded: appropriated by the few through the dispossession and enslavement of Africa and also through the exploitation – by overworking and underpayment in the midst of mass unemployment – of dockers in the imperial centre. Rather than turn against their own coworkers and comrades, “the jobless should lead the attack on the Bastilles, the bonded warehouses along the docks to solve the question of unemployment” (qtd. in Brown 44). Pankhurst concurred with McKay in her editorial titled “Stabbing Negroes in the London Dock Area” (James 283), in which she asks readers to abstain from racially fomented hatred which spawns undue divisions and dehumanizes both the hunted and the hunter. She writes: “Do you not know that capitalists, and especially British capitalists, have seized, by force of arms, the countries inhabited by black people and are ruining those countries and the black inhabitants for their own profit? ... Do you not think you would be better employed in getting conditions made right for yourself and your fellow workers than in stabbing a blackman?” (qtd. in James 283).

McKay’s socially engaged response came in the form a poem poignantly titled “Song of the New Soldier and Worker”, which is a topical extension of the sonnet “Tired Worker”. In this McKay presents a new vision and hope for the future, which rests on a new, different mindset of the working-class. This is a working-class no longer riddled with the poison of racism and imposed divisions. As a result, it can finally recognize the common foe and present a united front with a clear focus on the fight for its rights today and a systemic change tomorrow:

We are tired, tired, tired – we are work-weary and war-weary, [...]  
Life is dreary / And the whole wide world is sick and suffering.

We are weary, weary, weary, sad and tired and no longer  
Will we go on as before, glad to be the willing tools  
Of hard and heartless few, the favoured and the stronger,  
Who have strength to crush and kill, for we are fools.

We will calmly fold our arms sore from laboring, and aching  
 We will not still feed and guard the hungry, huge machine  
 That yawns with ugly mouth [...].

(McKay 140)

Only this kind of united front can one day also bring freedom from exploitation. That will be truly a “Labor’s Day”, a day of victory for the oppressed as captured in the sestet of the sonnet with the same title: “For Labor, Lord, himself will limn his life / And sing the modern songs of hope and vision, / And write the inspired tale of long-drawn strife / While mocked the poor blind world in grim derision, / Until she opened wide her eyes in awe / To see a new world order under labor’s law!” (McKay 137). McKay, of course, had his eyes set on the October Revolution and the Soviet Union, which resulted in his persecution and banishment from both Britain and the USA. This caused irreparable damage to the wider culture, impoverishing the Harlem Renaissance and American literary scene, for “black bolshevism would leave the Harlem scene” (Maxwell xvii).

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## **Stara estetika, nova etika: družbeno angažirani (proletarski) soneti Clauda McKayja**

Tematika razrednega boja zaseda eno od pomembnih mest v ameriškem kanonu prve polovice 20. stoletja. Vendar je poudarek izključno na romanopiscih, medtem ko družbeno angažirana poezija na temo razrednega boja ostaja obstranjena na čelu z njenimi tvorci, kot je bil Claude McKay, eden od osrednjih nosilcev zgodnjega obdobja harlemske renesanse in vodilni angleško pišoč pesnik delavskega gibanja. Članek obuja in v ospredje ponovno postavlja tovrstno poezijo, ki jo utelešajo McKayjevi družbeno angažirani soneti. Z njimi je na svojevrsten način okrepil zavest ameriškega (in angleškega) proletariata v boju proti rasizmu in ga pomagal kulturno opolnomočiti v skupnem boju za univerzalno družbeno pravičnost. McKayjeva poezija se naslanja na tradicionalno, visoko estetizirano obliko soneta, kateri daje novo etično vsebino in družbeno usmeritev.

**Ključne besede:** Claude McKay, sonet, razredni boj, kapitalizem, rasizem