The Tropics in New York

POEM TEXT

Bananas ripe and green, and ginger-root,
Cocoa in pods and alligator pears,
And tangerines and mangoes and grape fruit,
Fit for the highest prize at parish fairs,

Set in the window, bringing memories
Of fruit-trees laden by low-singing rills,
And dewy dawns, and mystical blue skies
In benediction over nun-like hills.

My eyes grew dim, and I could no more gaze;
A wave of longing through my body swept,
And, hungry for the old, familiar ways,
I turned aside and bowed my head and wept.

SUMMARY

Bananas (both ripe and unripe), fresh ginger, cocoa beans still in their husk, avocados, tangerines, mangoes, and grapefruit—all perfect enough to deserve a gold medal at a county fair.

Displayed in the window, these treats reminded me of my homeland, where bounteous fruit trees stood by little melodious creeks, and the sunrises sparkled with dew, and magical blue skies seemed to bless the hills—hills that reminded me of patient, holy nuns.

My eyes lost their light, and I couldn't look anymore; homesickness flooded my body and, feeling as if I were starving for my well-known, beloved homeland, I stepped away, lowered my head, and cried.

THEMES

THE POWER OF HOMESICKNESS

The speaker in "The Tropics in New York" expresses an intense homesickness. Seeing tropical fruit piled in a store window in New York, the speaker is overcome by memories of their own tropical home—and a longing for its beauty and familiarity. The poem suggests that homesickness can be a force as urgent and fundamental as hunger.

The sight of a pile of tropical fruits in a New York store window stops the speaker short: every one of these fruits reminds the speaker of their faraway home. The speaker seems thrilled by this grocery window's bounty, rejoicing in the sight of "Bananas ripe and green, and ginger-root, / Cocoa in pods and alligator pears." Judging by the speaker's tone, it seems that such a sighting is unusual—in the streets of New York, they aren't used to seeing cocoa still in its pod rather than already processed, or "alligator pears" (a.k.a. avocados).

The sight of all these tropical goods evokes not just the speaker's desire for the taste of familiar fruits, but their longing for home. Gazing at the produce, the speaker nostalgically remembers the very "fruit-trees" those treats grew on—and then the "dewy dawns, and mystical blue skies" of their home country. These memories of home are bittersweet for the speaker, who is now far away from the place where they grew up. The sight of the fruit overcomes the speaker with "a wave of longing" to return to this time and place in their life, a longing that makes the speaker "turn[] aside" and weep.

The speaker's homesickness feels a lot like a metaphorical *appetite*—not just for the taste of familiar fruits, but for a whole beloved landscape. The fruit in the window inspires the speaker's urgent "hunger" for "the old, familiar ways": they're practically starving for the "nun-like hills" of their home. The desire for home, to this speaker, is thus a force as fundamental as the need to eat. Homesickness, the poem suggests, can feel as debilitating as starvation.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

Bananas ripe and green, and ginger-root,
Cocoa in pods and alligator pears,
And tangerines and mangoes and grape fruit,
Fit for the highest prize at parish fairs,

The poem begins with the speaker listing off the names of tropical fruits: "Bananas ripe and green, and ginger-root," etc. The speaker doesn't offer any narrative context, such as "I was out walking and looked into a store window and saw piles of tropical fruit..." Instead, the reader is instantly immersed in the speaker's excitement over "Cocoa" that isn't processed but rather still in its "pod[]," "alligator pears" (avocados), and "tangerines and mangoes and grape fruit." The lush visual imagery suggests that the speaker simply doesn't know where to direct their gaze—there's so much to see!

These tropical goods, the speaker continues, are "Fit," or good enough, to win first prize "at parish fairs." This is an allusion to the poet's native Jamaica, which is broken up into units called parishes (much like the U.S. is divided into states).

But the poem doesn't take place in Jamaica; as the title tells readers, it's set in New York. And the polysyndeton of these lines evokes the speaker's wide-eyed wonder at seeing all these fruits from their homeland in such a distant city, as though "the tropics" have been transplanted thousands of miles away: the use of coordinating conjunctions—"And tangerines and mangoes and grape fruit"—might make readers think of the way the speaker's eyes are darting from one thing to the next, trying to take it all in at once.

Adding to the poem's pleasing, musical rhythm are alliteration ("pods" and "pears," "fruit, / Fit for the highest prize at parish fairs"), consonance ("Bananas ripe and green, and ginger-root," "And tangerines and mangoes and grape fruit"), and assonance ("highest prize"). The intensity of all these overlapping sonic devices evokes the heightened emotional state of the speaker, although the reader won't discover the significance of the speaker's encountering "The Tropics in New York" until after the stanza break.

LINES 5-6

Set in the window, bringing memories
Of fruit-trees laden by low-singing rills,

After the stanza break, it becomes clear that the speaker is so entranced because this fruit reminds them of another time and place: it "bring[s] memories / Of fruit-trees laden by low-singing rills" (rills being small creeks or rivulets). The implication is that the speaker is being reminded of their tropical homeland.

Notice the heightened language in line 6, with poetic expressions such as "laden," "low-singing," and "rills." These words, which you don't typically hear every day, evoke the speaker's deep nostalgia. The speaker is remembering their homeland in a way that is charged with longing.

In particular, the liquid /l/ consonance in line 6 feels beautifully earnest compared to the bouncier /p/, /g/, and /f/ sounds of the previous stanza, signaling the speaker's shift in tone as they go from observing to reminiscing:

> Of fruit-trees laden by low-singing rills,

Notice, too, that while the first stanza had an immediacy to it (in that the reader was dropped right into the speaker's world, seeing all the things the speaker was seeing without being given any context), the second stanza begins with a bit of an adjustment to the reader's understanding of what is happening. While there was nothing in the first stanza to indicate that the speaker wasn't standing amidst the fruit, seeing it and touching it and smelling it, the second stanza makes it immediately clear that the speaker is actually separated from the fruit by a window.

The window, then, symbolize the distance between the speaker and the place they are now remembering. Just as the window stands between the speaker and these fruits from home, time and distance stand between the speaker and the "fruit-trees" of their memory.

LINES 7-8

And dewy dawns, and mystical blue skies
In benediction over nun-like hills.

The speaker continues to describe their home country, a land of tropical fruit and "dewy dawns." The drumming /d/ alliteration again draws attention to the poem's striking imagery, infusing it with feeling. The speaker isn't just remembering these particular dawns, but *longing* for them.

The word "dewy" further suggests both the literal condensation of early mornings as well as the freshness and innocence of the speaker's youth. Perhaps they aren't just homesick for this particular place, but for the sense of wonder they had as a child.

These lines contain a metaphor and a simile as the speaker describes "mystical blue skies / In benediction over nun-like hills." The speaker is personifying the skies as a pastor praying for blessings and comparing the hills to nuns bent over in prayer.

The word "mystical" also implies a certain reverence for the landscape itself, which seems sacred—almost to connect the speaker to a sense of the divine. Once again, the speaker isn't just missing a particular time and place, but what that time and place *signified* to them.

LINES 9-10

My eyes grew dim, and I could no more gaze;
A wave of longing through my body swept,

In the third stanza, the speaker withdraws from their reminiscences, saying that their "eyes grew dim, and [they] could no more gaze." Grammatically speaking, it isn't entirely clear whether the speaker is saying that they "could no more gaze" at the fruits in the store window or at the *memories* these fruits evoked. The implication, perhaps, is that the speaker, stricken by a sudden, powerful homesickness, must turn away from both. The word "dim" suggests a light going out, as if the speaker's joy at thinking of home has been suddenly vanquished by the realization that home is so far away.

Because the poem is vague about the speaker's origins or current circumstances, it isn't clear exactly how far removed from home the speaker actually is—whether home is a place the speaker has recently left behind, or whether it is years and countless miles away. In a way, this lack of specificity allows just about anyone to relate to the speaker's feelings; everyone has

likely felt some degree of homesickness at some point or other in their lives.

That said, it's also worth considering the *poet's* specific experience as an immigrant, and how that experience informed this poem. The speaker's grief becomes a little more heartbreaking, perhaps, when one considers the distance (not just physically, but culturally) between New York and McKay's native Jamaica.

The speaker describes "a wave of longing" surging through their body, an image that suggests the speaker feels practically submerged in the desire to go home. Note the effectiveness of the syntax in line 10: "A wave of longing through my body swept" rather than "A wave of longing swept through my body." The difference is subtle, but places emphasis on the verb "swept" rather than the subject, "body." In this way, the line's syntax draws attention to the forcefulness with which homesickness can suddenly overwhelm one.

LINES 11-12

And, hungry for the old, familiar ways,
I turned aside and bowed my head and wept.

In line 11, the speaker uses a powerful metaphor to describe their homesickness: the speaker says that they were "hungry for the old, familiar ways."

By comparing homesickness to hunger, the poem makes the speaker's longing all the more immediate and visceral. The speaker's desire for their homeland and its "familiar ways" of life is so strong that it's like a physical need.

Like hunger, homesickness can run the gamut from distracting to downright debilitating. A little bit of homesickness is one thing, but since the speaker has compared theirs to a "wave" crashing through their body. The speaker is so overcome by it that they ultimately must "turn[] aside" from the tropical fruits in the shop display, lower their head, and cry. This homesickness has literally stopped the speaker in their tracks and reduced them to sobbing on a street in New York.

Again, the speaker turns to polysyndeton in this final line, those repeated "ands" subtly echoing the listing off of fruits in the first stanza.

> And tangerines and mangoes and grape fruit,
> [...]
> I turned aside and bowed my head and wept.

This grammatical parallelism emphasizes the fact that it's these fruits, and the homesickness they evoke, that makes the speaker so emotional. The gentle assonance of "head" and "wept" adds yet more lyricism and feeling to the poem's final moment, making this image of the speaker overwhelmed with homesickness linger in the reader's mind.

SYMBOLS

THE WINDOW

The poem uses a grocery store window to symbolize the speaker's separation from their homeland.

In the first stanza, the speaker describes an abundance of lush, tropical fruit: "bananas ripe and green, and ginger-root," "Cocoa in pods and alligator pears," "tangerines and mangoes and grapefruit." It seems there is no distance at all between the speaker and all this fruit—that is, until the stanza break.

The second stanza begins with the speaker saying that all this fruit is "Set in the window." In other words, rather than being among the tropical fruits, touching and smelling and tasting them, the speaker is looking at them through a window and being reminded of home. The window separates the speaker from the fruits just as distance and time separates the speaker from their homeland.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-8

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration heightens the language of the poem, adding intensity and music. Take a look at lines 2-4, for instance, with their many /p/ and /f/ sounds:

> Cocoa in pods and alligator pears,
> And tangerines and mangoes and grape fruit,
> Fit for the highest prize at parish fairs,

All this alliteration creates a sense of abundance. It also builds a vibrant, bouncy rhythm that evokes the speaker's rush of emotion upon seeing all this fruit.

There's some striking alliteration in lines 6-7 as well:

> Of fruit-trees laden by low-singing rills,
> And dewy dawns, and mystical blue skies

The liquid /l/ sounds in "laden" and "low" evoke the musical "singing" of the "rills" (or streams). Note, too, that this /l/ alliteration is echoed by /l/ consonance later in the stanza ("mystical blue," "nun-like hills"), adding to the gentle texture of the poem as the speaker is drawn into memories of their homeland. In line 7, meanwhile, the staccato /d/ sounds of "dewy dawns" draw readers' attention to the words and make them feel more potent. This potency, in turn, suggests the

speaker's emotional attachment to the memories they are describing.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "pods," "pears"
- **Line 3:** "fruit"
- **Line 4:** "Fit," "for," "prize," "parish," "fairs"
- **Line 6:** "laden," "low"
- **Line 7:** "dewy," "dawns," "blue"
- **Line 8:** "benediction"

CONSONANCE

The poem is filled with consonance, which, like alliteration, elevates the poem's language, making things sound more lyrical, musical, and memorable. Take a look at lines 3-4, for example, which, in addition to the aforementioned alliteration of /p/ and /f/ sounds, has lots of repeated /r/, hard /g/, and /t/ sounds:

> And tangerines and mangoes and grape fruit,
> Fit for the highest prize at parish fairs,

The sounds of these lines are rich and thick, creating a dynamic and lively rhythm and evoking the speaker's excitement as they try to take in all the bountiful tropical fruit before them.

In the next stanza, softer consonance changes the poem's tone. Gentle /l/ sounds, combined with short /ih/ assonance, slow 6 down, for example, as the speaker moves from noticing all the tropical fruits in the window to remembering the beautiful landscape of their home country:

> Of fruit-trees laden by low-singing rills,

Notice, too, that while the third stanza still contains consonance, it is not nearly as jam-packed with repeated sound as the first two stanzas are. It seems that as the speaker's "eyes [...] dim" with homesickness, some of the pizzazz fades from the poem, allowing the reader to feel the emotional "hung[er]" that the speaker is feeling.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Bananas," "ripe," "green," "ginger-root"
- **Line 2:** "pods," "alligator pears"
- **Line 3:** "tangerines," "mangoes," "grape fruit"
- **Line 4:** "Fit for," "highest prize," "parish fairs"
- **Line 6:** "fruit-trees," "laden," "low," "rills"
- **Line 7:** "dewy dawns," "mystical blue skies"
- **Line 8:** "benediction," "nun-like hills"
- **Line 10:** "wave," "swept"
- **Line 11:** "old, familiar," "ways"

ASSONANCE

Like alliteration and consonance, assonance adds to the poem's musicality and rhythm. Take lines 3 and 4, for instance, with their various /ay/ and /ah/ sounds and long /i/ sounds:

> And tangerines and mangoes and grape fruit,
> Fit for the highest prize at parish fairs,

These sounds contribute to the line's bouncy rhythm. They grant the poem more intensity, signaling the speaker's heightened emotional state.

Likewise, notice the many short /ih/ and long /ee/ sounds of lines 5-6:

> Set in the window, bringing memories
> Of fruit-trees laden by low-singing rills,

Again, assonance fills the poem with music that evokes the speaker's intense feelings at this moment.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "And tangerines and," "mangoes," "grape"
- **Line 4:** "highest prize"
- **Line 5:** "in," "window," "bringing," "memories"
- **Line 6:** "trees," "singing rills"
- **Line 9:** "My eyes," "gaze"
- **Line 10:** "wave," "longing," "body"
- **Line 12:** "head," "wept"

IMAGERY

The poem is filled with evocative imagery that immediately pulls the reader into the speaker's world. The imagery of the first stanza, for example, evokes a lush display overflowing with tropical fruits:

> Bananas ripe and green, and ginger-root,
> Cocoa in pods and alligator pears,
> And tangerines and mangoes and grapefruit,

It almost seems as if the speaker doesn't know where to look—there's simply so much to see!

In the second stanza, this tropical imagery paints a vivid picture of the speaker's homeland as a place teeming with color and life: the speaker describes trees "laden" with fruit, "low-singing rills" (or creeks), "dewy dawns," "mystical blue skies," and "nun-like hills." This imagery is notably less straightforward than the list of fruits in the first stanza; it has the dreamy, charged feeling that comes with the passage of time. The speaker isn't just *remembering*, but "longing" for this other place.

The rich imagery dries up by the final stanza, reflecting the fact that the speaker's "eyes grew dim." Filled with sorrow and

homesickness, the speaker can only cry.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-3
- Lines 5-8
- Line 9

SIMILE

The poem uses a simile in lines 7-8 as the speaker likens the "hills" of their homeland to "nun[s]." This comparison fits in with the imagery already established by the poem: the speaker has said that the "skies" of this country are "mystical," a word that suggests there's something spiritual or religious about them, and "in benediction"—that is, involved in a kind of prayer or invocation for divine blessing.

The "nun-like hills" complete this picture: the skies are like a pastor praying for divine blessings while the hills are like the nuns who attend the service, kneeling in prayer along with the pastor. The simile lends depth to the speaker's recollections of home; it's not just the landscape that the speaker is missing, but a whole way of life. There is something sacred and nearly mythical about these memories. They have taken on a great deal of significance in the time the speaker has been away, and when the speaker now thinks of home, it is with almost a sense of religious devotion and worship.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-8:** "mystical blue skies / In benediction over nun-like hills."

METAPHOR

The poem uses a metaphor in lines 7-8 to describe the landscape of the speaker's home country:

> And dewy dawns, and mystical blues skies
> In benediction over nun-like hills.

By describing the "skies" as being "In benediction" (a benediction is a kind of prayer in which one asks for divine guidance or blessing), the speaker personifies the landscape and suggests it has a kind of spiritual significance to the speaker. In other words, the speaker doesn't just miss the tropical home they left behind because it was beautiful and had a lot of tasty fruits; they miss it because they had a meaningful relationship with the environment they grew up in.

These seemingly prayerful skies must seem especially far away in New York of all places, a booming metropolis where the sky is often difficult to see at all! The "mystic[ism]," or spirituality, of the speaker's homeland must feel like a distant dream.

In the third stanza, the speaker uses another metaphor. The speaker's longing for home is akin to being "hungry for the old, familiar ways." In this way, the poem likens homesickness to hunger, an actual, physical gnawing at the gut. The speaker isn't just fondly remembering their homeland, in other words: they are beside themself with their desire to return to a specific time and place in their life.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-8:** "mystical blue skies / In benediction"
- **Line 10:** "A wave of longing through my body swept,"
- **Line 11:** "hungry for the old, familiar ways,"

ENJAMBMENT

While the majority of the poem's lines are end-stopped, the second stanza does contain two enjambed lines. Take a look:

> Set in the window, bringing memories
> Of fruit-trees laden by low-singing rills,
> And dewy dawns, and mystical blue skies
> In benediction over nun-like hills.

The sudden appearance of enjambed lines after a full stanza of end-stopped lines seems to mirror the speaker's shift in tone as they go from looking at all the tropical fruits in a store window to being reminded of their faraway home.

In other words, as the speaker moves from noticing to remembering, the poem's rhythm changes; rather than a bunch of short clauses piled one on top of another (like fruit in a store display!), the second stanza contains longer, more expansive clauses which carry across line breaks.

It's also worth noting that these enjambed lines happen to correspond to the poem's only slant end rhyme, between "memories" in line 5 and "skies" in line 7. In contrast to the exact rhymes that characterize the majority of the poem's rhyme scheme, the more subtle slant rhyme places less of an emphasis on that final, rhyming word. Between this slant rhyme and enjambment, the second stanza has a more natural flow to it, suggestive of the open natural spaces the speaker is missing.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-6:** "memories / Of"
- **Lines 7-8:** "skies / In"

POLYSYNDETON

Polysyndeton first appears in lines 1-3:

> Bananas ripe and green, and ginger-root,
> Cocoa in pods Cocoa in pods and alligator pears,
> alligator pears,
> And tangerines and mangoes and grape fruit,

Because these lines are essentially a list of fruits, it would have been just as grammatically correct (and more efficient) to use commas in place of all the "ands." However, consider how different the *rhythm* of these lines would be had the poet chosen to use commas instead of coordinating conjunctions:

> Bananas ripe and green, ginger-root,
> Cocoa in pods, alligator pears,
> Tangerines, mangoes, and grape-fruit,

In terms of the literal meaning, polysyndeton doesn't change anything. What it does change is the *feeling* of the words. The piling up of conjunctions creates a sense of abundance, and it also suggests that the speaker is overwhelmed upon seeing all of this fruit.

Polysyndeton is also used in line 7, where the speaker uses the conjunction "and" where punctuation would technically have worked:

> And dewy dawns, and mystical blue skies

Again, this creates a feeling of abundance—of a list piling up. Those repeated "ands" suggest that the speaker could go on and on; there are simply so many things that the speaker misses about their home.

Polysyndeton appears in the last line of the poem as well:

> I turned aside and bowed my head and wept.

It would have been just as correct to write "I turned aside, bowed my head, and wept." The difference is subtle, but effective. First, polysyndeton maintains the integrity of the poem's meter (because the poem is written in pentameter, it needs 10 syllables per line—omitting an "and" would make it too short). Second, there is an orderliness to "I turned aside, bowed my head, and wept" that suggests that the speaker is taking a series of logical steps; the only possible response to this scene is to cry.

Where Polysyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "and"
- **Line 2:** "and"
- **Line 3:** "And," "and," "and"
- **Line 7:** "And," "and"
- **Line 12:** "and," "and"

VOCABULARY

Alligator pears (Line 2) - Another name for avocados.

Parish (Line 4) - A name for the local governmental divisions of Jamaica (like states or counties).

Rills (Line 6) - Small creeks or streams.

Benediction (Line 8) - A holy blessing.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

The poem is made up of three quatrains, or four-line stanzas. The three stanzas follow the speaker's trajectory of:

1. Seeing tropical fruits in a shop window;
2. Being reminded of home;
3. And feeling a "wave" of homesickness as the speaker realizes how far away they are from this place that they love and cherish.

The poem is short and succinct, yet powerfully emotive. The brevity of the poem, then, is perhaps suggestive of the ease and quickness with which a sudden and unexpected homesickness can overwhelm someone.

METER

The poem is written in iambic pentameter—that is, lines of five iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm. Here's line 12 as an example:

> I turned | aside | and bowed | my head | and wept.

However, like a lot of iambic verse, this poem sometimes plays with its meter. Take a look at the variation in line 2, for instance:

> Cocoa | in pods | and al- | ligat- | or pears,

This line begins with a spondee, a foot with two stressed beats in a row. This bouncy beginning makes this line feel as lively and enticing as the fruits it describes.

Iambic pentameter is a familiar, classic form, common in English-language poetry. Using it here, the speaker might be emphasizing the fact that they're not writing in a form associated with their native country, but with their English-speaking adoptive country. That's a fitting choice for a poem about feeling far from home!

RHYME SCHEME

The poem follows a strict ABAB rhyme scheme in each stanza. In other words, the first and third lines of each stanza rhyme with each other, as do the second and fourth.

For the most part, these rhymes are exact: "root" and "fruit," "pears" and "fairs," etc. These perfect rhymes give the poem its pleasing and memorable musicality.

However, there is one slant rhyme: between "memories" and

"skies" in lines 5 and 7. This less-than-perfect rhyme suggests the rosy, idyllic, not-quite-real nature of memory. Just as the speaker can't touch the fruits in the window because they are behind glass, the speaker can't reach out and feel their homeland; they can only remember it. And though the memories are glowing and beautiful, they aren't *real*. The slant rhyme, then, subtly emphasizes the speaker's pain as they are unable to again walk through the picturesque landscape of their home.

SPEAKER

The speaker of this poem is someone who is, first and foremost, not from New York. The poem doesn't explicitly state where they *are* from, other than that their homeland is a tropical one. This is why, when the speaker encounters a store window filled with tropical fruits, the speaker is transported to another time and place—a happy one, it seems, characterized by trees heavy with fruit and "mystical blue skies" above "nun-like hills." This sudden, intense remembrance of their homeland fills the speaker with grief; they long for "the old, familiar ways" now far from them.

While the poem doesn't need to be read autobiographically to be effective (anyone who's ever experienced homesickness of any kind will likely resonate with the speaker's bittersweet memories of home), the poem undoubtedly corresponds to McKay's own experience as an immigrant. Born in Jamaica, McKay moved to the United States when he was 23 years old. This poem was published eight years later.

While it can certainly be applied to homesickness of any sort, the poem takes on added meaning when one considers what it would have been like for someone like McKay (or countless other immigrants), living in a land so fundamentally different from his own.

SETTING

The setting of this poem is a shop window in New York filled with all sorts of tropical fruits. The sight of these goods "bring[s] memories" of home to the speaker, who readers can assume grew up in a tropical location and is overcome by emotion to see signs of "the tropics in New York."

The poem's setting then temporarily shifts, within the speaker's mind, to this homeland filled with "fruit-trees laden by low-singing rills" (that is, trees lush with fruit near little trickling, musical brooks) and "dewy dawns, and mystical blue skies."

Finally, the speaker is soon brought back to the present as a "wave of longing" flows through their body. The setting returns to the New York street where the speaker is presently standing, moved to tears by these memories.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"The Tropics in New York" appeared in Claude McKay's 1922 collection *Harlem Shadows*. Now understood to be one of the most important publications of the Harlem Renaissance (a cultural and artistic movement that began in Harlem, New York in the 1920s), *Harlem Shadows* dealt explicitly with issues of racial inequality in America. Soon many other Black writers and poets, such as Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes, began publishing work that sought not only to illuminate the difficulty of Black life in a racist society, but also to celebrate Black culture and heritage.

In fact, though much of McKay's work confronted racism directly, he also wrote extensively of his love for his native Jamaica. Born into a family of peasant farmers, McKay found beauty and significance in the simple rhythms of country life, and his love for the natural landscapes of Jamaica infuses the imagery and emotion of this poem.

McKay also grew up studying canonical British writers—John Milton, Alexander Pope, and the Romantics—taught to him by his older brother, who was a teacher, and by a neighbor, Walter Jeckyll. It was the latter, an English writer and translator, who encouraged McKay to write his early poems in his own Jamaican Patois dialect. Jeckyll also helped McKay publish his first collection, *Songs of Jamaica*.

Like many other writers of the Harlem Renaissance, McKay was also inspired by the writings of sociologist, historian, and activist W.E.B. Du Bois, who advocated for Pan-Africanism, a movement that nurtures solidarity between people of African descent regardless of where they are in the world. Thus, though McKay was from Jamaica, he began to understand his own struggle as being part of the struggle of Black people everywhere, an understanding which informed his work as a writer and socialist activist.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Claude McKay was born in Jamaica and first moved to the United States in 1912. McKay's hometown, Sunny Ville, was made up of a mostly Black population, and when he moved away—first to Kingston, Jamaica, later to South Carolina and then Alabama to attend college—he was outraged at the overt racism he encountered. These experiences fueled him to write about his experience as a Black person (and more specifically a Black immigrant) in the U.S. McKay eventually moved to New York City, where he helped usher in the explosion of Black arts and culture known as the Harlem Renaissance that spanned the 1920s and '30s.

During this time period, which followed the end of World War I, the United States had experienced substantial economic growth. This resulted in the so-called "Roaring '20s"—a decade

characterized by an increase in opportunity and financial security for many Americans.

Black Americans, however, were overwhelmingly excluded from this shift in fortune. Segregation and disenfranchisement meant that Black Americans didn't have the same rights and privileges guaranteed to white people, and this affected their ability to get higher-paying jobs, send their children to well-funded schools, or buy homes in neighborhoods not already decimated by poverty.

While the poem doesn't confront any of this explicitly, the reality is that a Black person in 1920s New York would perhaps not have been able to afford the imported, "exotic" fruits that were, ironically, native to McKay's own homeland of Jamaica. This gives the poem added resonance, as the speaker "turn[s] aside and we[eps]" not just because they are reminded of home, but because they are reminded of the double standard of living in a racist society.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Aloud — Listen to Ziggy Marley performing the poem. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/video/77373/the-tropics-in-new-york)
- A Biography of the Poet — Learn more about Claude McKay at the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/claude-mckay)
- The Harlem Renaissance — Learn more about the literary and historical moment McKay was part of. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/learn/glossary-terms/harlem-renaissance)
- An Essay on the Poem's Langauge — Read Michael North's essay about race and linguistics in "The Tropics in New York." (https://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/criticism/michael-north-tropics-new-york)
- The Poet Reading His Own Work — Listen to a recording of McKay reading several of his poems—including this one. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L_xpilVoWuo)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER CLAUDE MCKAY POEMS

- America
- Harlem Shadows
- If We Must Die
- The Harlem Dancer

HOW TO CITE

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