



## Poems in *The Liberator* Claude McKay (1919)

*Claude McKay was a black Jamaican who immigrated to the United States. As a poet and novelist, he contributed to the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s-30s. In the 1920s, McKay was attracted to communism; he made a months-long visit to the Soviet Union, where he spoke and wrote about African Americans as an oppressed class. By the 1930s, however, McKay had become disillusioned with Stalinism. Shortly before his death in the late 1940s, he became Catholic.*

*Presented here are three poems that McKay published early in his career. These poems appeared in *The Liberator*, a monthly magazine produced by white socialists in New York City. Despite the magazine's Marxist orientation, McKay included in these poems religious themes—or at least religious images—of sacrifice and divine commissioning. The first poem is a protest against the Paris peace conference that formally ended World War I. McKay objects that the conference granted independence to European ethnic groups who had been living within the German and Austrian empires, but did not do the same for African peoples living under Western imperialism. The second and third poems protest against lynching and violent race riots in the United States, which had surged in 1919, the year that the poem was published.*

### 1. **The Little Peoples**

The little peoples of the troubled earth,  
the little nations that are weak and white—  
for them the glory of another birth,  
for them the lifting of the veil of night.  
The big men of the world, in concert met,  
have sent forth in their power a new decree:  
Upon the old harsh wrongs, the sun must set;  
henceforth the little peoples must be free!

But we, the blacks, less than the trampled dust,  
who walk the new ways with the old dim eyes—  
we to the ancient gods of greed and lust  
must still be offered up as sacrifice.  
Oh, we who deign to live but will not dare,  
the white world's burden must forever bear!

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### 2. **If We Must Die**

If we must die—let it not be like hogs  
hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,  
while round us back the mad and hungry dogs,  
making their mock at our accursed lot.  
If we must die—oh, 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!

Oh, kinsmen! We must meet the common foe;  
though far outnumbered, let us still be brave,  
and for their thousand blows deal one deathblow!  
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!

\* \* \*

3.

**To the White Fiends**

Think you I am not fiend and savage, too?  
Think you 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 you do  
I could match—outmatch: Am I not Africa'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!

**Sources:**

- 1-2. Claude McKay, "Sonnets and Songs," *The Liberator*, July 1919, 20-21, <https://hdl.handle.net/2333.1/djh9w2j2>.
3. Claude McKay, "To the White Fiends," *The Liberator*, September 1919, 25, <https://hdl.handle.net/2333.1/547d7z7>.

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This edited presentation of poems by McKay is intended for *teaching* purposes only. For *research* purposes, you should consult, quote, and cite the source publications listed above.



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