

**HARLEM SHADOWS;  
THE POEMS OF  
CLAUDE MCKAY**

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Harlem Shadows; The Poems of Claude McKay by Claude McKay & Max Eastman

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**CLAUDE MCKAY & MAX EASTMAN**

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CLAUDE MCKAY**



# HARLEM SHADOWS

THE POEMS OF

CLAUDE McKAY

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY  
MAX EASTMAN



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## INTRODUCTION

These poems have a special interest for all the races of man because they are sung by a pure blooded Negro. They are the first significant expression of that race in poetry. We tried faithfully to give a position in our literature to Paul Laurence Dunbar. We have excessively welcomed other black poets of minor talent, seeking in their music some distinctive quality other than the fact that they wrote it. But here for the first time we find our literature vividly enriched by a voice from this most alien race among us. And it should be illuminating to observe that while these poems are characteristic of that race as we most admire it—they are gentle-simple, candid, brave and friendly, quick of laughter and of tears—yet they are still more characteristic of what is deep and universal in mankind. There is no special or exotic kind of merit in them, no quality that demands a transmutation of our own natures to perceive. Just as the sculptures and wood and ivory carvings of

the vast forgotten African Empires of Ifé and Benin, although so wistful in their tranquillity, are tranquil in the possession of the qualities of all classic and great art, so these poems, the purest of them, move with a sovereignty that is never new to the lovers of the high music of human utterance.

It is the peculiarity of his experience, rather than of his nature, that makes this poet's race a fact to be remembered in the enjoyment of his songs. The subject of all poetry is the experience of the poet, and no man of any other race in the world can touch or imagine the experience of the children of African slaves in America.

Claude McKay was born in 1890 in a little thatched house of two rooms in a beautiful valley of the hilly middle-country of Jamaica. He was born to the genial, warm, patient, neighborly farmer's life of that island. It was a life rich in sun and sound and color and emotion, as we can see in his poems which are forever homeward yearning—in the midst of their present passion and strong will into the future, forever vividly remembering. Like a blue-bird's note in a March wind, those sudden clear thoughts of