America

POEM TEXT

Although she feeds me bread of bitterness,
And sinks into my throat her tiger's tooth,
Stealing my breath of life, I will confess
I love this cultured hell that tests my youth.
Her vigor flows like tides into my blood,
Giving me strength erect against her hate,
Her bigness sweeps my being like a flood.
Yet, as a rebel fronts a king in state,
I stand within her walls with not a shred
Of terror, malice, not a word of jeer.
Darkly I gaze into the days ahead,
And see her might and granite wonders there,
Beneath the touch of Time's unerring hand,
Like priceless treasures sinking in the sand.

SUMMARY

America is an oppressive place that forces bitter resentment upon me, attacks me like a wild beast, and robs me of my life and vitality. Even so, I'll admit that I love this hellish country that challenges my youthful strength and resistance. I feel the country's immense strength flowing through my veins, filling me with the power I need to resist its prejudicial hatred. The country's sheer size is like a flood that sweeps me up in its energy. But, much like a rebellious warrior calmly facing a king within his kingdom, I stand within America's borders without a single scrap of fear, hatred, or mockery. I look towards the country's grim future, in which I see the nation's monumental power and prosperity collapsing and fading from memory in time, like a vast array of riches sinking into the sand.

THEMES

AMERICAN BITTERNESS AND LOVE

Published in 1921, nine years after Claude McKay emigrated from majority-Black Jamaica to the majority-white United States, "America" channels the poet's ambivalent feelings toward his adopted country. The poem's speaker (who can be read as McKay himself) confesses his "love" for America despite the country's oppressive "hate" towards people like him. The poem illustrates the speaker's struggle (and, perhaps by extension, that of all Black Americans) to call a country that hates him home, even as the speaker also suggests that this internal conflict ultimately makes him stronger.

The speaker describes his American experience as "hell." He accuses America of forcing "bitterness" on him, doing physical and/or emotional violence to him, and robbing him of health and vitality. He even compares the country to a tiger who bites his neck and "steal[s his] breath of life"—in other words, it hurts, stifles, endangers, and to some extent silences him. By calling America "this cultured hell that tests my youth," he further underscores his emotional conflict, suggesting that even at its best, living in the country is a constant—and often torturous—challenge.

Only after listing these harms does the speaker grudgingly "confess" his "love" for America. In explaining his passion for the country, he highlights its exciting vitality and power, which paradoxically gives him the "strength" to resist its cruelty. The speaker emphasizes that America is above all large and powerful, depicting it as an irresistible force that flows into him "like the tides." Therefore, the same power that torments him also *fills* him, strengthening rather than defeating him. It's as if this painful love has revitalized rather than killed his spirit.

In a final emotional shift, the speaker reiterates that he does not return America's hatred, but instead views it with a kind of stoic sense of calm as he foresees its doom. Comparing himself to a "rebel" confronting a "king" without "terror, malice," or "jeer," he insists that he doesn't hate or mock America—but doesn't fear it either. As he "gaze[s] into the days ahead," he adopts the role of a prophet, predicting that America's "might" and "wonders" will one day fall to ruin. In the end, he achieves a kind of emotional balance. Although the pain and vitality of American life "sweep[]" over him, they haven't swept him *away*: he ultimately views the country with the calm of someone who understands its full reality.

Overall, "America" confronts a subject that wounded, animated, and preoccupied McKay. As a Black immigrant to America during the era of Jim Crow, he uses the poem to sort through his feelings about a country that—despite its vast resources—harshly oppressed people of his skin color. The emotional arc of the poem from "bitterness" to "love" to stoicism can thus be seen as the poet's way of processing the beauty, complexity, and problematic nature of the United States.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-11

NATIONAL VS. INDIVIDUAL POWER

"America" dramatizes the conflict between an oppressive country and the individuals it oppresses. As the poem unfolds, the power dynamic between America and the speaker shifts. While at first the country is a merciless power that torments and "tests" the speaker, the speaker ultimately claims a kind of visionary authority *over* the country by predicting that its "might" will eventually crumble. Through this arc, the poem suggests that individuals can survive brutal oppression, but oppressive power itself can't survive forever.

The speaker presents America as a large, powerful, oppressive country. He first personifies the country as a "she" who "feeds" him "bitterness" as if by force, then compares it to a tiger attacking him. The speaker also declares his "love" for America, yet "confess[es]" this love as if under torture in "hell." This language initially seems to imply that the speaker is totally at the country's mercy.

Yet the speaker also indicates that America isn't as invulnerable as it would like to believe, in part because oppressed individuals like the speaker stand in a unique position to speak truth to its power. The speaker compares himself to a "rebel" fearlessly facing a "king," positioning himself as a truer embodiment of American democratic virtues than the country itself. By adding that he already stands "within [America's] walls," he implies that the kind of individual power and perspective he represents has already broken through the country's defenses—that the nation's "might" has already been undermined.

Rather than threatening retaliation or revolution against his oppressive country, then, the speaker acts as a prophet predicting its downfall. He serenely envisions the destruction of America's "might and granite wonders" as the inevitable product of "Time," which will bury the country's glory like "priceless treasures sinking in the sand."

Though he's personally in the grip of America's "might," he wields the imaginative power to see beyond it, to a time when it will vanish. In this sense, he has transcended his "hell," as his higher understanding frees him from fear and mockery. And by positioning himself above "terror," "malice," or "jeer" (mockery) towards America, he also suggests that such things are ultimately trivial or immaterial. The country may even be afraid of *him*, because it shows a petty "hate" that he feels no need to return.

Like another famous sonnet, Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Ozymandias," McKay's "America" warns that even mighty regimes collapse. However, "America" does so from the viewpoint of an individual who feels both tormented and invigorated by such a regime. Rather than an ancient or faraway land, it confronts the poet's own adopted country, working out a complicated personal stance toward a modern empire. Countering vast oppression with individual, imaginative power, the speaker wins a kind of David vs. Goliath victory: he understands his cruel society better than it understands him.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-3
- Lines 5-10
- Lines 12-14

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

Although she feeds me bread of bitterness,
And sinks into my throat her tiger's tooth,
Stealing my breath of life,

The speaker begins by harshly criticizing America. The country has, the speaker implies, beat him down him with its oppressive violence. Rather than nourishing his body and spirit, it has force-fed him "bread of bitterness." This metaphor suggests that bitterness—or resentment and great difficulty—is something the country imposes on him regularly, as if it's a daily diet of bread.

Although America's Declaration of Independence honors the right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," the country attacks the speaker like a "tiger's tooth" piercing his neck. This second metaphor indicates that the speaker feels genuinely *attacked* by the country, as if the United States has purposefully hindered his vitality by taking away his "breath of life." The hard alliteration and consonance in phrases like "bread of bitterness" and "tiger's tooth" help express the speaker's anger about this; they also hint at the violent, merciless nature of the nation.

These opening lines also personify the U.S. as a woman ("she"), following an old-fashioned convention of referring to countries by female pronouns. In patriotic literature, the feminized country is typically portrayed as an ideal woman and the object of the speaker's love. Here, the speaker flips that convention by portraying America as a tormenting woman—a cruel mistress—whom he loves in spite of her violent hatred.

The first three lines also establish the sonnet's use of iambic pentameter, a meter in which each line contains five iambs, or feet consisting of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable (da-DUM). This is the most common metrical pattern found in the sonnet form—a form most often used to express complicated kinds of love. From the first lines, then, McKay uses this poetic convention while putting a new spin on it, since "America" is—in many ways—a love poem that expresses a very deep, complex, and even disastrous relationship between a man and his country.

LINES 3-4

I will confess

I love this cultured hell that tests my youth.

After criticizing America's oppressive violence, the speaker somewhat surprisingly "confess[es]" his "love" for the country. However, his word choices in these lines further highlight the complexity of this love.

The verb "confess" is sometimes tied to outbursts of romantic feeling, but it can also be associated with admissions made under torture—like the torture America inflicts on the speaker. His view of the country as a "cultured hell" (a place with redeeming cultural virtues despite its torments) suggests a reason for his mixed feelings, even if it doesn't fully explain his "love." The phrase "cultured hell" is almost a paradox, in fact, since hell is traditionally depicted as a place of barbaric cruelty—not a "cultured" place. The speaker thus implies that this cruelty is what lurks beneath America's civilized surface.

(Since "America" is a Shakespearean sonnet, "hell" may also be a sly literary joke on McKay's part. In Shakespeare's day, "hell" could be slang for the female anatomy, so Shakespeare and his contemporaries often used it in puns involving sex, women, and the "hellishness" of love. An example comes at the end of Shakespeare's Sonnet 129, one of his so-called Dark Lady sonnets, which refers to sex as "the heaven that leads men to this hell.")

Moreover, America "tests" the speaker's "youth," as if cruelty challenges his youthful strength and endurance. There's a hint that the speaker—or perhaps the poet himself, a Black immigrant surviving in a racist country—takes some pride in his ability to withstand this "test."

For all these reasons, the speaker's declaration of love for the country certainly isn't straightforward or particularly patriotic in the conventional sense. It's heavily qualified, even reluctant, as in a forced confession under extreme circumstances. It calls attention to the emotional difference between saying "I love this country" and "*I will confess* that I love this country." The speaker manages to feel love even though anger or resentment might seem more appropriate.

LINES 5-7

Her vigor flows like tides into my blood,
Giving me strength erect against her hate,
Her bigness sweeps my being like a flood.

These lines further explain the speaker's complicated love for America. Although the country oppresses him, he also finds himself energized by its raw power. Rather than being intimidated by America's "vigor," "strength," and "bigness," the speaker feels as if these qualities have "flow[ed]" into him like ocean tides. They make him feel big and strong even as the country—in its "hate" of people like him—wants him to feel small and weak. Rather than crushing him, this power and intensity helps him *withstand* hatred.

In other words, the speaker seems to subvert the country's worst qualities, grabbing hold of its positive traits as a way of feeding off its strength. The "tides" metaphor signals a tide-like shift in the poem's power balance. Suddenly, the speaker isn't just a target of America's abuse: he's a force that equals and withstands it. This shift sets up the more significant change that will occur in line 8. (Sonnets often contain an important "turn"—a shift in tone, thought, or narrative—around lines 8-9.)

There's also an undertone of romance and sensuality to this section. The phrase "Giving me strength erect" hints at male sexual excitement, while "sweeps my being" calls to mind the idea of romance "sweep[ing]" the speaker off his feet. Here again, the speaker illustrates his passionate—yet deeply mixed—feelings about America while drawing on the sonnet's tradition of examining complex, difficult kinds of love.

LINES 8-10

Yet, as a rebel fronts a king in state,
I stand within her walls with not a shred
Of terror, malice, not a word of jeer.

In these lines, the speaker demonstrates his ability to withstand America's cruelty and mistreatment. This time, the speaker uses a simile to present himself as a "rebel" confronting a "king in state," implying that he's as strong and fearless as an insurgent who comes face to face with the very person he's trying to overthrow: a powerful king.

Turning this simile into something of an extended metaphor, the speaker says: "I stand within her walls with not a shred / Of terror, malice, not a word of jeer." By doing this, the speaker confronts the country (which he once again personifies as a woman) that both torments and invigorates him. What's more, he does this without a "shred" of fear, indicating that he's full of courage. Though America possesses a king-like power, he is not intimidated by it—in fact, it's almost as if he feeds off the country's raw energy, turning its own strength back on itself.

This, of course, makes it seem as if the speaker sees himself as America's enemy. However, there's a certain aspect of love to this metaphor, as if the speaker's trying to say that, though America is deeply imperfect, he's ready to fight to improve it. This is most likely why he says that he stands before the "king" without a "shred" of "malice" or a "word of jeer": he doesn't want to harm the country, but wants to stand up to it and help it become a better version of itself.

The speaker's use of enjambment in line 9 gives these lines a feeling of forward momentum:

> I stand within her walls with not a shred
> Of terror, malice, not a word of jeer.

Inserting a line break after the word "shred" creates a brief moment of anticipation and suspension, as readers wait for the conclusion of the speaker's sentence. This makes the end-stop that comes after the word "jeer" all the more noticeable, giving

this section a certain push-and-pull rhythm that makes the poem's pacing and language feel fresh and engaging.

LINE 11

Darkly I gaze into the days ahead,

The speaker shifts from imagining himself as some kind of "rebel" or revolutionary to presenting himself as a prophet. "Darkly I gaze into the days ahead," he says, suggesting that he has the power to see into the country's future.

The word "darkly" carries several possible meanings. Because it's associated with a prophecy in this moment, it recalls the following line from the Bible: "For now we see through a glass, darkly" (1 Corinthians 13:12). In this context, "darkly" means "obscurely" or "imperfectly" in reference to human understanding of reality. It's arguable that the speaker alludes to this verse in order to suggest that his vision of the future is partial and imperfect.

But "darkly" could also suggest that he looks *gloomily* or *grimly* toward the future, implying that the country faces tough times ahead. This would be sadly ironic, since these kinds of negative associations with the word "darkness" have also, historically, been part of the racism the speaker criticizes.

Finally, "darkly" acknowledges the speaker's Blackness, which is the implied (though never stated) reason that he experiences so much "hate" in a racist America. According to this reading, the word could imply something like: "from my perspective as a Black person in America."

Internal rhyme links "gaze" and "days," emphasizing how closely the poet's vision matches the future. Meanwhile, the alliteration of the /d/ sound in "**d**arkly" and "**d**ays" adds a strong, rhythmic pulse that makes the line stand out, calling attention to the speaker's ability to see what will become of his flawed country.

LINES 12-14

And see her might and granite wonders there,
Beneath the touch of Time's unerring hand,
Like priceless treasures sinking in the sand.

In the final lines, the speaker envisions America's doom. Having adopted the role of a prophet, he foresees the country's "might" (power) and "granite wonders" (monuments, buildings, and other achievements of a prosperous civilization) disappearing "like priceless treasures" into sand. In a reversal of the beginning—which portrays the country as cruelly indomitable—he predicts that America's vast power and prosperity will fall to ruin.

The speaker identifies the cause of this ruin as "Time's unerring hand." That is, he personifies time and suggests that it never fails to destroy all civilizations, even the mightiest ones. Despite what the previous lines—with their emphasis on love, hate, and violence—might have led the reader to expect, "rebels" like the speaker don't have to "conquer" America in either a romantic or militant sense. Time will take care of the job, the poem implies, using its effortless "touch" to crumble otherwise overpowering nations.

This indicates that countries perpetrating hatred and bigotry are destined for failure; these things, in other words, are toxic and harmful to a nation's wellbeing. As one of the people whom America "hate[s]," then, the speaker is perfectly positioned to understand its flaws—the very same flaws that will presumably bring the country down.

These lines are quite alliterative, as the speaker repeats the /t/ sound in "**t**ouch," "**T**ime," and "**t**reasures." He also uses the sibilant /s/ sound in the words "pri**c**eless," "**s**inking," and "**s**and." Both of these sonic devices give the language a smooth flow that ushers readers toward the end of the poem.

The word "sinking" also echoes line 2, when the speaker says that America "**sinks**" its teeth into his throat. Now, though, America itself "sink[s]" into the sand, which means it's gone from a powerful aggressor to a failing, desperate country.

This idea of America sinking into the sand is also an allusion to another famous sonnet: Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Ozymandias." Published about a century earlier (1818), "Ozymandias" describes a tyrant—once the arrogant ruler of a mighty civilization—whose statue now lies broken and abandoned in the desert. As a fable about the fleeting nature of power and the decay of empires, the poem meshes well with the themes of "America."

POETIC DEVICES

PERSONIFICATION

The speaker personifies the United States as a powerful, appealing, but very cruel woman. Referring to countries with feminine pronouns is an old-fashioned convention that Claude McKay did not invent. However, this poem uses it in an original, politically pointed way, turning this personified "she" into a representation of America's injustice *and* of its strength.

Drawing on the sonnet tradition, McKay implicitly compares America to the remote or unavailable loved ones from other famous sonnet sequences of the literary past—sequences in which speakers discuss the pain of unrequited love. Similarly, the speaker announces his love for a personified version of America. Instead of boldly professing this love, though, he "**con**fess[es]" it, hinting at his particularly complex relationship with his own country.

This makes sense, considering that the speaker is the object of America's violence and "hate." His love for the country is therefore passionate but deeply conflicted and perhaps even a bit masochistic.

The poem also personifies Time, whose "unerring hand" the

speaker imagines as a destructive force that ruins America's power with just a "touch." In this way, the speaker contrasts America's violent attempt to dominate him with the light, easy touch of Time as it destroys civilizations.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "she feeds me bread of bitterness, / And sinks into my throat her tiger's tooth,"
- **Lines 5-7:** "Her vigor flows like tides into my blood, / Giving me strength erect against her hate, / Her bigness sweeps my being like a flood."
- **Line 9:** "I stand within her walls"
- **Lines 12-13:** "And see her might and granite wonders there, / Beneath the touch of Time's unerring hand,"

METAPHOR

"America" contains a number of metaphors, particularly in its first quatrain. The idea that America "feeds" the speaker "bread of bitterness" metaphorically suggests that the country constantly antagonizes him, forcing toxic emotions into him as if it's his daily bread. It also implies that his experience of America is as unpleasant as the taste of old, moldy bread. More subtly, it compares America to the kind of person who would feed someone a diet of disgusting food, such as a cruel parent, an abusive partner, or even a torturer or jailer.

The next metaphor compares America to a tiger biting the speaker's throat, wounding and suffocating him ("Stealing [his] breath of life"). This vivid comparison captures America's cruelty, suggesting that the country is slowly killing the speaker—and by extension, other oppressed people. A third metaphor, "cultured hell," portrays America as a brutal, punishing place that nonetheless has a surprisingly civilized exterior.

After these metaphors (all of which appear in the first quatrain), the poem's figurative language mostly occurs in the form of similes. These similes build on the initial metaphors, extending the portrayal of America as a powerful and domineering force (that is nevertheless more vulnerable than it suspects). Beneath all of this, though, runs the implied extended metaphor of a love-hate relationship between the masculine speaker and the personified country—a disturbing romance that he's sorting out in this very sonnet.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Although she feeds me bread of bitterness,"
- **Lines 2-3:** "And sinks into my throat her tiger's tooth, / Stealing my breath of life,"
- **Line 4:** "cultured hell"
- **Line 6:** "Giving me strength erect against her hate,"
- **Lines 9-10:** "I stand within her walls with not a shred / Of terror, malice, not a word of jeer."

SIMILE

The similes in the poem appear alongside its metaphors, helping the speaker bring the poem's ideas to life in vivid, striking ways. Consider, for instance, line 5, when the speaker uses a simile to describe America's overall effect on him:

> Her vigor flows like tides into my blood,

This simile suggests that America's "vigor"—that is, its powerful energy—is like a strong current that rushes into the speaker, filling him with excitement. At the same time, though, this isn't a purely positive thing. The country, after all, is full of hatred and racism, so the fact that it rushes into the speaker inevitably means that it inundates him with these negative qualities, too.

The speaker hints at this in yet another simile, in which he once again compares America to a strong current of water:

> Her bigness sweeps my being like a flood.

Whereas the first simile comparing America's "vigor" to a current of water implies that the speaker draws energy from the country's vitality, this simile suggests that America's power *overwhelms* the speaker, "sweep[ing]" over him in an oppressive way.

But this doesn't make the speaker cower in fear, as evidenced by the simile in line 8 that presents him as a "rebel front[ing] a king in state." Instead of backing down in response to America's flood-like strength, the speaker confronts it head-on as if he's an insurgent coming face-to-face with an oppressive king.

The poem's final simile builds on this by hinting that the country's profound power won't necessarily be enough to help it succeed in the future. In the final three lines, the speaker compares America's "might" and "wonders" to a set of "treasures sinking in the sand." The country that originally looked invincible, then, now looks doomed. In contrast, the speaker—once at the mercy of his overpowering country—now has the power and assurance of a prophet.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "Her vigor flows like tides into my blood,"
- **Line 7:** "Her bigness sweeps my being like a flood."
- **Line 8:** "as a rebel fronts a king in state,"
- **Lines 12-14:** "And see her might and granite wonders there, / Beneath the touch of Time's unerring hand, / Like priceless treasures sinking in the sand."

ALLITERATION

The speaker uses alliteration to tie key phrases together and add emphasis to certain words. Take, for example, the first line, in which the speaker alliterates the /b/ sound:

Although she feeds me bread of bitterness,

The quick repetition of the /b/ sound gives the line a strong rhythmic feeling, since the /b/ is a rather blunt, heavy sound. This also calls attention to the word "bitterness," emphasizing the idea that America mistreats the speaker by failing to properly nourish him—although a country should uplift its people and help them thrive, America forces little more than "bitterness" upon the speaker.

A similar effect occurs when the speaker alliterates the /t/ sound in line 2, saying, "And sinks into my throat her tiger's tooth." The /t/ sound in this moment is percussive and somewhat harsh, reflecting America's merciless persecution of the speaker.

Elsewhere, the speaker uses slightly gentler forms of alliteration. The last line, for example, features the alliteration of the sibilant /s/ in the phrase "sinking in the sand." This subtly mimics the sifting sound sand might make as "priceless treasures" (another very sibilant phrase) sink into it. Alliteration therefore helps the speaker spotlight certain ideas or phrases while also simply adding to the overall sound of the language, making it feel more lush and evocative.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "bread," "bitterness"
- **Line 2:** "tiger's tooth"
- **Line 6:** "her hate"
- **Line 7:** "bigness," "being"
- **Line 8:** "state"
- **Line 9:** "stand," "within," "walls with"
- **Line 10:** "word"
- **Line 11:** "Darkly," "days"
- **Line 13:** "touch," "Time's"
- **Line 14:** "sinking," "sand"

ASSONANCE

Although assonance isn't as prevalent in the poem as alliteration, it does show up here and there. It's most pronounced in lines 5 through 7, appearing in words like "vigor," "into," "giving," "bigness," "erect," "against," "sweeps," and "being." These repeating vowel sounds smooth the flow of the verse in an effect that suits the description of America's power "flow[ing] like tides."

Some subtler assonance also occurs in the last three lines: for example, the long /i/ sound in "might," "Time's," "Like," "priceless"; the /uh/ sound in "wonders," "Touch," "unerring"; and the short /i/ in "sinking" and "in." Again, these lines describe a smooth, fluid process—objects sinking into sand—so it's fitting that assonance makes the verse flow more smoothly.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "she," "feeds," "me"
- **Line 5:** "vigor," "into"
- **Line 6:** "Giving," "erect," "against"
- **Line 7:** "bigness," "sweeps," "being"
- **Line 11:** "gaze," "days"
- **Line 12:** "might," "wonders"
- **Line 13:** "touch," "Time's," "unerring"
- **Line 14:** "Like," "priceless," "sinking," "in"

CONSONANCE

Like the alliteration and assonance in "America," the consonance adds richness and emphasis to the language. For instance, line 11 features the /d/ and /z/ sounds:

Darkly I gaze into the days ahead,

The /d/ sound gives these words a solid sense of rhythm, while the /z/ sound pairs nicely with the assonant /ay/ in "gaze" and "days." This calls attention to the line, causing it to stand out—an important effect, considering that this is arguably the most important line in the entire poem, since it's the moment in which the speaker foresees America's downturn. Consonance thus helps the speaker enrich the language while highlighting the poem's most crucial and meaningful points.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Line 2
- Line 3
- Line 4
- Line 5
- Line 6
- Line 7
- Line 8
- Line 9
- Line 10
- Line 11
- Line 12
- Line 13
- Line 14

IRONY

The poem is laced with ironies large and small. For example, its description of America as a "cultured hell" has an oxymoronic, ironic flavor to it. Hell is a place of barbaric cruelty, so how can it truly be "cultured"? And what does it matter how cultured it is if it's still hell?

There's also a situational irony in the way America's "vigor" gives the speaker "strength erect against her hate." The very power with which the country (at least, its white majority) attempts to subdue or crush him strengthens and excites him

instead. Its simplistic hate fuels his complex love. In that way, American oppression produces the opposite of its intended result.

This power dynamic, in turn, feeds into a larger dramatic irony concerning the speaker's relationship to his adopted country. Like a "rebel" who already "stands within [the] walls" of a country he challenges, he knows better than America how temporary and threatened its power really is. In other words, he knows the country better than it knows itself, or at least understands its weaknesses—the implication here is that the hatred and racism upon which America built its power is exactly what will lead to its undoing.

The speaker's stance here is most likely informed by Claude McKay's experience as a Black immigrant outside the American mainstream. Even as America attempts to dominate people like him, he understands that "time" dominates and destroys all civilizations. He implies that America's violence against its people only speeds up its own destruction. The image of America "sinking in the sand" contains the kind of irony familiar from the popular proverb, "The bigger they are, the harder they fall."

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "cultured hell"
- **Lines 5-6:** "Her vigor flows like tides into my blood, / Giving me strength erect against her hate,"
- **Lines 8-9:** "Yet, as a rebel fronts a king in state, / I stand within her walls"
- **Lines 12-14:** "And see her might and granite wonders there, / Beneath the touch of Time's unerring hand, / Like priceless treasures sinking in the sand."

ALLUSION

The speaker makes a couple of allusions in the poem, drawing on other—older—pieces of writing to add some depth and another dimension to "America." For instance, the line "Darkly I gaze into the days ahead" echoes a famous biblical passage about prophecy. This passage is found in 1 Corinthians 13: 9-12:

> For we know in part, and we prophesy in part.
> [...]
> For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.

Like the apostle Paul in this passage, the speaker indicates that his gift of prophecy is only partial, his view of the future murky and incomplete.

The closing image of America's treasures "sinking in the sand" is also most likely an allusion to Percy Bysshe Shelley's sonnet "Ozymandias," which describes a shattered statue of the Egyptian pharaoh of the same name. Shelley presents this broken treasure wasting away in desert sands as a monument both to the faded glory of a past civilization and to the arrogance of its tyrannical leaders. The speaker's language suggests that the proud American empire will someday crumble in the same way.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 11:** "Darkly I gaze into the days ahead,"
- **Lines 12-14:** "And see her might and granite wonders there, / Beneath the touch of Time's unerring hand, / Like priceless treasures sinking in the sand."

VOCABULARY

Cultured (Line 4) - Civilized or refined.

Vigor (Line 5) - Strength, energy, and vitality. In this context, "vigor" captures the energetic quality of America—its hustle and bustle—while also hinting at its robust power. The speaker states that America's "vigor" flows into him: in other words, *invigorates* him.

Erect (Line 6) - Stiffly upright. This word is often associated with sexual arousal, so the speaker is possibly implying that America—personified as a woman—attracts and excites him.

Fronts (Line 8) - Faces, appears before, or confronts.

Jeer (Line 10) - A taunt or mocking sound.

Darkly (Line 11) - In this context, "darkly" has several possible connotations. The speaker may mean that he's gazing into the future with a sense of grim pessimism, *or* that he only has a dim understanding of what's to come.

Unerring (Line 13) - Without error.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"America" is a sonnet, and, more specifically, an English sonnet. This form consists of 14 lines divided into three quatrains followed by a final couplet. Traditionally, sonnets are associated with passion and romantic conflict. "America" plays with this tradition by staging an emotionally complex conflict between the speaker (a Black man) and his hateful—but nonetheless beloved—country.

Unlike most Shakespearean sonnets, in which the poem's *volta* or turn appears in the final couplet, the turn in "America" comes in line 8, when the speaker says:

> Yet, as a rebel fronts a king in state,

In this moment, the speaker goes from letting America dominate him to actually standing up to it. This shift is marked by the word "yet," which calls attention to the poem's turn, signalling to readers that the speaker won't remain passive in the face of the country's oppressive ways.

METER

As a traditional sonnet, "America" is written in iambic pentameter, meaning that each line consists of five iambs, or metrical feet made up of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable (da-DUM). The meter remains smooth and stately throughout, with very few variations. Consider the opening quatrain:

> Although | she feeds | me bread | of bit- | terness,
> And sinks | into | my throat | her ti- | ger's tooth,
> Stealing | my breath | of life, | I will | confess
> I love | this cul- | tured hell | that tests | my youth.

The pattern here is extremely regular, creating a steady da-DUM da-DUM rhythm that is pleasing to the ear and draws readers from line to line. There is only one metrical substitution in this entire section, when, instead of using an iamb (unstressed-stressed), the speaker uses a trochee (stressed-unstressed): "Stealing." This calls attention to the idea that America robs the speaker of his breath, trying to take away his life force in its attempt to oppress him.

Other than this, there are very few metrical substitutions throughout the entire poem. Instead, most of the lines are rhythmically predictable, leading to a smooth-flowing style that matches the speaker's sense of calm in the face of hardship. This steady, calm meter also creates an ironic contrast to America's violent, oppressive ways.

RHYME SCHEME

"America" uses the traditional rhyme scheme of the English sonnet:

ABAB CDCD EFEF GG

To state this even more simply, the poem is organized into three rhyming quatrains and a closing couplet.

All of the rhymes in the poem are exact, except for the slant rhyme that occurs in lines 10 and 12 between the words "jeer" and "there." What's more, almost all of the rhymes are what's known as masculine rhymes, meaning that they only rhyme on a final stressed syllable. For instance, the only parts of "bitterness" and "confess" that rhyme are their last (stressed) syllables. This gives the language a controlled but still musical feeling, making the speaker's words sound simultaneously serious and appealing.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "America" is basically identical to the poet, Claude McKay. The poem contains no evidence that McKay is adopting a persona different from his real self, and much evidence that he's speaking from his own experience. As a Jamaican-born Black man who emigrated to the United States in 1912, lived in the Deep South and New York City, and ultimately became a US citizen, he encountered fierce prejudice in his adopted country.

The speaker's references to America's "hate," to his "rebel" posture within its hostile "walls," and to his "darkly" prophetic vision all point to his marginalized status in a racist country. His attitude toward the hatred combines "bitterness" and "love" and finally rises to stoic serenity. As an abused outsider and a kind of prophet figure ("gaz[ing] into the days ahead"), he implies that he can see America for what it really is—unlike the mainstream Americans perpetuating racism and oppression.

SETTING

The poem's setting is named in its title: this is a poem *about* its setting. "America" comments on the entire United States. It reflects Claude McKay's perspective as a Black immigrant poet living in Harlem (a historically Black neighborhood of New York City) in the 1920s.

During this era of US history, many living Black Americans had been born into enslavement, racial segregation laws remained in force, and anti-Black and anti-immigrant prejudices were rampant. These conditions often made the country a "hell" for marginalized people, even as it claimed to be a beacon of democracy and land of opportunity.

The references to America's "vigor" and "granite wonders" don't necessarily imply an urban setting—they could apply to mountain country, for example—but they may be meant to evoke the soaring skyline and big-city energy of cities like New York.

Overall, "America" casts the United States as a place of stirring power and vitality on the one hand and shocking hatred and cruelty on the other. The country is, in the speaker's view, an empire doomed by its flaws.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"America" grew out of the creative context of the Harlem Renaissance, a movement that McKay himself helped start. The epicenter of the movement was the Harlem neighborhood of New York City, whose Black population swelled during the "Great Migration" of the early 20th century. Having launched

his poetry career with two collections in 1912 (*Songs of Jamaica* and *Constab Ballads*), McKay emigrated to the U.S. that same year, moved to Harlem by the end of the decade, and wrote prolifically about his adopted country.

"America" is a perfect example of his interest in this subject, first appearing in the avant-garde magazine *The Liberator* in December 1921. It was collected in *Harlem Shadows* the following year. This collection profoundly influenced other Black artists of the period, including the poet Langston Hughes and the author James Weldon Johnson, who later remarked: "Claude McKay's poetry was one of the great forces in bringing about what is often called the 'Negro Literary Renaissance.'"

The Harlem Renaissance overlapped with the early-20th-century period of experimentation known as Modernism, during which writers overthrew 19th-century literary conventions in pursuit of formally and politically groundbreaking art. McKay's poem appeared three years after the end of World War I, as poetic Modernism was gaining steam in America. Though its form is traditional, its approach is subversive: it bends the centuries-old conventions of the sonnet to a political vision that was daringly new.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The United States in which Claude McKay published "America" was a burgeoning, wealthy, powerful nation, quickly becoming a global superpower after aiding the Allied victory in World War I. It was also a place of extreme racial prejudice. Jim Crow laws mandating segregation were still in force throughout much of the U.S. and wouldn't be fully dismantled for decades to come (the effects of these deeply harmful laws *still* resonate in many areas of the country).

The Ku Klux Klan was also on the rise, and there were frequent lynchings of Black Americans (particularly in the South, where McKay lived as a student at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama). To add to this, Black workers were formally or functionally barred from many occupations. Even in the New York City of the Harlem Renaissance, Black residents suffered from discriminatory housing, employment, education, and policing practices, all of which fueled poverty and other social ills.

Simultaneously, a wave of anti-immigrant xenophobia, driven in part by wartime fears of "enemies at home," swept the US in the wake of World War I. During this era, the country barred most immigration from Asia, severely curtailed immigration from Europe, and gave rise to white supremacist ideas within its mainstream culture. One example of this was the author Lothrop Stoddard's bestseller, *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World-Supremacy* (1920)—a racist, paranoid screed that portrayed "white civilization" as endangered by other races.

In other words, 1920s America gave McKay, a Black immigrant writer, plenty of reasons to accuse the country of "hat[ing]" him. It also gave him reason to believe the country was headed toward collapse, though not for the reasons people like Stoddard believed.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Biography of Claude McKay — Read a biography of Claude McKay at the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/claude-mckay)
- More Context on McKay — Read more about Claude McKay's life and work at the Encyclopedia Britannica. (https://www.britannica.com/biography/Claude-McKay)
- Introduction to the Harlem Renaissance — Read a brief guide to McKay and other writers of the Harlem Renaissance at the Academy of American Poets. (https://poets.org/text/brief-guide-harlem-renaissance)
- The Poem Aloud — Listen to Tubyez Cropper of the Beinecke Library read the poem aloud. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M9OeES_fInY)
- The Harlem Renaissance on Video — Watch a brief video introduction to the Harlem Renaissance and the 1920s cultural context in which McKay wrote "America." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9gboEyrj02g)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER CLAUDE MCKAY POEMS

- Harlem Shadows
- If We Must Die
- The Harlem Dancer
- The Tropics in New York

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Allen, Austin. "*America*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 5 Nov 2020. Web. 28 Sep 2022.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Allen, Austin. "*America*." LitCharts LLC, November 5, 2020. Retrieved September 28, 2022. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/claude-mckay/america.