

# The White House



## POEM TEXT

1 Your door is shut against my tightened face,  
 2 And I am sharp as steel with discontent;  
 3 But I possess the courage and the grace  
 4 To bear my anger proudly and unbent.  
 5 The pavement slabs burn loose beneath my feet,  
 6 And passion rends my vitals as I pass,  
 7 A chafing savage, down the decent street;  
 8 Where boldly shines your shuttered door of glass.  
 9 Oh, I must search for wisdom every hour,  
 10 Deep in my wrathful bosom sore and raw,  
 11 And find in it the superhuman power  
 12 To hold me to the letter of your law!  
 13 Oh, I must keep my heart inviolate  
 14 Against the potent poison of your hate.

righteous anger, yet they must strive to keep a lid on their "passion"; to express their discontent would be to risk running afoul of white society's "law[s]" (cruelly, the same laws that entrench systemic racism). When white people hold all the power, Black people like the speaker must suppress their justifiable rage simply to survive.

The speaker senses their complete exclusion from "The White House" of the poem's title, which [symbolizes](#) what McKay called the "vast modern edifice of American Industry": the powers and freedoms to which white Americans have access (as opposed to "the private homes of white people" or the president's residence specifically). The door of this house is "shut against [the speaker's] tightened face," making sure the speaker can't come in. The firm divide between the speaker and the white house represents the divide between Black and white America; Black people like the speaker can only press their faces against the gleaming windows of this house.

This door is also made of glass and "boldly shines," as if to say that it—and the white people inside—have nothing to hide or be ashamed of. Indeed, the street looks "decent" (as in respectable), even as the pavement slabs seem to "burn loose beneath" the speaker's feet. On the surface, then, this is a civilized society—but its decency is a constructed illusion (and the "burn[ing]" pavement suggests, perhaps, that it's really a kind of hell).

This exclusion upsets the speaker deeply. Observing the "White House," the speaker is "sharp as steel with discontent." They feel "raw" anger and deep "passion" churning inside them. It would be understandable if they acted on such strong emotions (e.g., through violence). Yet the speaker seeks the "wisdom" and "power" of dignified restraint, if only for their own emotional health. The poem suggests, then, that Black people suffer a double injustice in American society: they must find not only the strength to survive but also the willpower to manage their outrage.

The speaker thus bears their anger "proudly and unbent," relying on all their stores of "courage" and "grace" to keep it in check. They ironically describe themselves as a "chafing savage," which is how they might be described from a racist white perspective. If the speaker did act on their "wrath[.]" the "letter of your [white people's] law" would quickly make them suffer. (For example, white law enforcement might respond with brutality.)

Worse, the same hatred that targets the speaker would violate their "heart"; they would have swallowed the "potent poison of your hate" and stooped to their oppressors' level. The speaker, therefore, seeks "the superhuman power" to remain peaceful in their unjust society (in order, perhaps, to find other means of



## SUMMARY

The speaker says that the "white house" of the poem's title has shut its door right in the speaker's face, which is stiff with discomfort. The speaker's frustration makes them feel as sharp as steel. Still, the speaker is brave and dignified enough to carry their rage with pride and walk tall. The stones of the pavement feel like they're on fire beneath the speaker's feet and passion is tearing the speaker up inside as they walk, like an angry wild man, along the well-kept road where that closed glass door shines brightly. The speaker laments that they have to constantly dig for wisdom deep inside their angry, pained, wounded heart and summon the superhuman ability to abide by the rules of white society. The speaker has to keep their heart pure and free from the strong poison of this society's hatred.



## THEMES



### THE PAIN AND FRUSTRATION OF RACISM

Claude McKay's 1922 [sonnet](#) "The White House" explores the pain and frustration of living in a racist society. The speaker describes being shut out of a [metaphorical](#) "white house" in order to illustrate the way Black Americans are denied the same basic rights and opportunities as white people. Such blatant discrimination fills the speaker with

opposing it).

#### Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14



## LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

### LINES 1-4

*Your door is shut against my tightened face,  
And I am sharp as steel with discontent;  
But I possess the courage and the grace  
To bear my anger proudly and unbent.*

These opening four lines, the [sonnet's](#) first [quatrain](#), introduce the dramatic tension at the heart of "The White House": the speaker has been denied entrance to a house, and this spurs righteous anger that the speaker must keep in check.

This situation isn't meant to be taken literally: the poem is using this [metaphorical](#) scene to explore the burdens, cruelties, and hypocrisy of American racism.

- It's fair to assume that the speaker is Black; Claude McKay was an important figure during the Black cultural and artistic revival known as the Harlem Renaissance, and he wrote often about Black people's experiences.
- The house, meanwhile, represents the white-dominated social structure of the United States. In McKay's own words, it stands for the "vast modern edifice of American Industry from which Negroes were effectively barred as a group." While the poem's title likely makes readers think of the White House (that is, the president's residence), McKay insisted this is not the case. (Of course, Black Americans in McKay's day certainly were excluded from political life.)

The speaker uses [apostrophe](#) throughout the poem, addressing this house (and thus white society) directly. First, the speaker notes, with clear frustration, that the house's door is "shut against my tightened face." The speaker clearly is not allowed into this house. That the speaker's face is "tightened," meanwhile, conveys the tension that the speaker feels at being "shut" out—metaphorically, at being denied the same opportunities, rights, and freedoms to which white people have access.

Through a [simile](#), the speaker describes themselves as "sharp as steel with discontent." This image might bring to mind a sword or other weapon, and it creates the sense that the speaker is wound up tightly and ready to lash out at the world—to put up a fight against this discrimination.

Yet the speaker doesn't let their anger curdle into violence. The speaker bears their rage with "courage" and "grace," bravely remaining dignified in the face of clear injustice. Note, though, that the speaker doesn't aim to overcome this anger altogether. The speaker still *feels* angry. The speaker simply insists on maintaining control over that anger. The speaker bears that anger "proudly" and "unbent." The speaker stands tall and won't bend, or bow, to their emotions.

"The White House" is a Shakespearean sonnet, a form that connects the poem to European literary history. The speaker may be shut out from the "white house" of the poem's title, but McKay proves that he can write a historically white poetic form as well as anyone else.

As a Shakespearean sonnet, the first part of the poem is divided into four quatrains that each follow an alternating (ABAB) [rhyme scheme](#). The rhymes here and throughout the poem are perfect ("face"/"grace" and "discontent"/"unbent").

The poem also uses the standard sonnet meter of [iambic pentameter](#). Each line contains five poetic feet called iambs, which follow an unstressed-stressed syllable pattern:

Your door | is shut | against | my tight- | ened face,  
And I | am sharp | as steel | with dis- | content;  
But I | possess | the cour- | age and | the grace  
To bear | my ang- | er proud- | ly and | unbent.

Altogether, the poem maintains a steady, measured rhythm that reflects the speaker's own self-control. The lines themselves unfold "proudly," their meter "unbent."

### LINES 5-8

*The pavement slabs burn loose beneath my feet,  
And passion rends my vitals as I pass,  
A chafing savage, down the decent street;  
Where boldly shines your shuttered door of glass.*

The second [quatrain](#) begins with the speaker walking away from the house "down the decent street." The pavement seems to "burn loose beneath [the speaker's] feet," a [metaphor](#) that conveys the speaker's discomfort. Though the speaker walks calmly, inside they're filled with burning, boiling rage.

Indeed, they say that "passion rends my vitals as I pass," meaning that their strong emotions are tearing the speaker up inside as they walk by the white house. The sharp [alliteration](#) of "passion"/"pass" adds force to the speaker's statement, conveying the intensity of those passions.

The speaker then calls themselves a "chafing savage." "Chafing" means irritated/angry and here could relate to the speaker's own emotions and/or the feeling the speaker inspires in the white people in the area merely by virtue of existing. "Savage," meanwhile, nods toward the racist notion that Black people are less civilized (a notion that was long used to justify a range of

racial injustices, including slavery). The speaker is being [ironic](#), describing themselves how they know *those in the white house* would describe them—despite their own "savagery" in cruelly shutting the door in the speaker's face.

The speaker builds on that irony in the second half of line 7 by calling the street "decent." In other words, it's supposedly a *good* street—a place that's safe, well kept, and so on. But the street doesn't feel "decent" to the speaker; again, it's like walking on burning stones—perhaps because the speaker can sense the hatred that infuses the "pavement slabs."

Walking down this street, the speaker resents the way that those in power monopolize what it means to be good or normal. That is, white society gets to define things like "decency" and "savagery" in whatever way suits it best, and everyone else has to play along—or else. To white society, the street is "decent" despite the fact that—or, really, *because of the fact that*—Black people aren't welcome on it. There's nothing "decent" about such discrimination, and the speaker rages at this hypocrisy.

The speaker next observes the way that the "shuttered door of glass" of the white house "boldly shines." The fact that it "boldly shines" suggests both pride and even material wealth. To white people, there is nothing wrong with the door. It seems to glint in the sun, proudly announcing the white house's dominance.

The thick /p/, /b/, and /sh/ alliteration, [consonance](#), and hissing [sibilance](#) fill this passage with sonic intensity:

The pavement slabs burn loose beneath my feet,  
And passion rends my vitals as I pass,  
A chafing savage, down the decent street;  
Where boldly shines your shuttered door of glass.

The speaker might be keeping themselves together, but readers can hear the swirling emotions threatening to tear them apart.

### LINES 9-12

*Oh, I must search for wisdom every hour,  
Deep in my wrathful bosom sore and raw,  
And find in it the superhuman power  
To hold me to the letter of your law!*

In line 9, the speaker re-affirms their commitment to staying in control. The "Oh" here signals the speaker's exasperation; the speaker doesn't want to give in to hate, but it's not an easy process. The speaker

[...] must search for wisdom every hour,  
Deep in my wrathful bosom sore and raw,

It's a daily struggle, in other words, to search inwardly for the strength that keeps the speaker going. Part of the speaker longs to address the injustice. They have a "wrathful bosom

sore and raw"—that is, a heart that longs for revenge because of the pain it has suffered and witnessed. It would be natural to give into that desire for payback, but the speaker wishes to rise above it (and, perhaps, seek more long-term, non-violent retribution).

Staying "proud[] and unbent," of course, is easier said than done. That's especially true when readers consider that the speaker lives within a world governed by a set of laws designed to uphold structural racism. That's why, from the speaker's perspective, it's "your law" (as opposed to "our law"). The laws are unjust, but the speaker must abide by them in order to survive.

The speaker can't show their true feelings or openly fight back against injustice because doing so would give this racist society a reason to punish the speaker. And holding oneself back, the speaker argues, requires "superhuman power." The speaker must embody virtues and qualities that don't always come naturally.

### LINES 13-14

*Oh, I must keep my heart inviolate  
Against the potent poison of your hate.*

"The White House" sticks with the Shakespearean [sonnet](#) tradition by ending with a rhyming [couplet](#). The quick rhyme between "inviolate" and "hate" concludes the poem on a forceful note, conveying the intensity of the speaker's emotions.

Notice, too, how the couplet repeats the phrase that began line 9: "Oh, I must" (an example of [parallelism](#)). Again, that "Oh" illustrates the speaker's sheer exhaustion; having two "Ohs" captures the extent to which racial persecution wears the speaker down. The speaker is not just tired, but *doubly* tired.

While part of the speaker would love to express their outrage (and perhaps seek the satisfaction of revenge), the speaker also senses that doing so isn't the answer. It's not just that the speaker doesn't want to stoke the wrath of those in power; the speaker also doesn't want to let hate into their heart. Instead, they vow to "keep [their] heart inviolate," or unviolated—untainted by the same "potent poison" that makes (parts of) white America hate the speaker. The plosive /p/ [alliteration](#) of "potent poison" makes it sound as though the speaker is spitting this phrase, and the poison itself, out in disgust.

In keeping their [metaphorical](#) heart pure, the speaker maintains an important moral and ethical distance from those who discriminate against them.



## SYMBOLS



## THE WHITE HOUSE

The white house in this poem is a [symbol](#) of white society in general. In McKay's own words, it represents "the vast modern edifice of American Industry from which Negroes were effectively barred as a group." In other words, it's like a great big country club with lots of benefits but which doesn't let Black people be members.

Indeed, the door of the house is "shut" firmly "against" the speaker's "face." This makes it sound like the speaker is close to that door, right on the edge of a world to which they don't have access. The fact that they're firmly on one side of the door reflects the division between Black and white people in the U.S., especially in McKay's day. In 1922, when McKay published "The White House," Black people were denied basic civil rights and legally discriminated against throughout society. They lacked access to the opportunities and freedoms behind the door of that "white house."

The fact that the door to the house is "glass" is also telling. This detail suggests that the house is brittle or delicate; white supremacy can be shattered, perhaps, with a well-aimed stone. At the same time, the fact that the house "boldly shines" suggests that it has no shame. It *proudly* discriminates.

## Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Your door is shut against my tightened face,"
- **Line 5:** "The pavement slabs burn loose beneath my feet,"
- **Lines 6-7:** "And passion rends my vitals as I pass, / A chafing savage, down the decent street;"
- **Line 8:** "Where boldly shines your shuttered door of glass."

speaker's language come across as forceful and self-assured. The sounds almost overwhelm the poem—much like the speaker's anger threatens to overwhelm the speaker themselves.

The alliteration in the next lines works in much the same way. The mixture of /s/, /sh/, and thudding /d/ sounds in lines 7-8 convey the speaker's spitting rage:

A chafing savage, down the decent street;  
Where boldly shines your shuttered door of glass.

These lines feature some broader [sibilance](#) as well ("decent," "glass"), adding to their intensity. (Note that such sibilance appears throughout the poem, infusing it with an undercurrent of sinister, hissing anger.)

Later, the growling, back-of-the-throat alliteration of "wrathful" and "raw" evokes the speaker's pain as they dig deep into their own wounded heart for the strength to carry on. And in the poem's final line, the crisp alliteration of "potent poison" again suggests the speaker's distaste; they seem to be spitting the words out in disgust.

## Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "shut"
- **Line 2:** "sharp"
- **Line 3:** "possess"
- **Line 4:** "bear," "proudly," "unbent"
- **Line 5:** "pavement," "burn," "beneath"
- **Line 6:** "passion," "pass"
- **Line 7:** "savage," "down," "decent," "street"
- **Line 8:** "shines," "shuttered"
- **Line 10:** "wrathful," "sore," "raw"
- **Line 11:** "superhuman"
- **Line 12:** "letter," "law"
- **Line 14:** "potent poison"



## POETIC DEVICES

## ALLITERATION

"The White House" uses [alliteration](#) (and broader [consonance](#)) to create sonic intensity. The vivid sounds of the poem reflect the speaker's passionate emotions.

Take lines 3-6, for example, which are packed with plosive /p/ and /b/ sounds:

But I possess the courage and the grace  
To bear my anger proudly and unbent.  
The pavement slabs burn loose beneath my feet,  
And passion rends my vitals as I pass,

These are bold, loud sounds, and all this alliteration makes the

## APOSTROPHE

In a way, "The White House" uses [apostrophe](#) from start to finish as the speaker directly addresses the "white house" of the poem's title. Apostrophe (and the subtle [personification](#) of the house) adds to the dramatic intensity of the poem by providing the speaker with a clear target for their rage. It provides a focal point for the speaker's emotion, sidestepping one of racism's key advantages: its insidious ability to appear in many shape-shifting forms. Note the repeated use of the second-person possessive adjectives: "Your door [...] your shuttered door of glass [...] your law [...] your hate." The speaker, all those "yours" make clear, did not create this problem. The fact that the house makes no reply, meanwhile, underscores the fact that complaints like the speaker's are often ignored.

Lines 9 and 13 feature apostrophe as well, each beginning with

a poetic "Oh." In these moments, the speaker is lamenting the difficulty of keeping their anger under control and steeling themselves against the hatred and cruelty of the world in which they live. The repeated "Oh" (which is also an example of [anaphora](#)) suggests exasperation and the fatigue that comes with living in a racist world. The "I must" that follows, meanwhile, conveys the speaker's determination not to stoop to the hateful level of those who shut the door to that house.

#### Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "Oh"
- **Line 13:** "Oh"

## METAPHOR

"The White House" takes place mostly within a [metaphorical](#) set-up. The white house of the title, for example, isn't one specific building (e.g., the president's residence) but a metaphor for American society more generally. The "decent street" isn't necessarily a real street, but more a device to express how what it's like to walk through a white supremacist society as a Black person.

The poem often uses metaphor (and one [simile](#)) to express more abstract emotional ideas. The speaker becomes "sharp as steel with discontent," implying the way that racism threatens to make people violent in retaliation. Strong emotion "rends [the speaker's] vitals" (that is, tears up the speaker's insides), and the speaker's heart is "sore and raw," battered from the cruel injustices with which the speaker must contend. Note, too, how the "pavement slabs burn" beneath the speaker's feet. This metaphor conveys the speaker's discomfort. Though this is an outwardly "decent street," fires seem to burn below.

The poem also ends with a metaphor, describing racism as the "potent poison of your hate." This describes the way racism spreads like venom, filling society with fear, hatred, and violence.

#### Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-4:** "And I am sharp as steel with discontent; / But I possess the courage and the grace / To bear my anger proudly and unbent."
- **Lines 5-6:** "The pavement slabs burn loose beneath my feet, / And passion rends my vitals as I pass,"
- **Line 9:** "Oh, I must search for wisdom every hour,"
- **Line 10:** "Deep in my wrathful bosom sore and raw"
- **Line 14:** "potent poison"

## IRONY

"The White House" uses [irony](#) to underscore the injustice and hypocrisy of American racism. In line 7, the speaker refers to themselves as a "chafing savage," ironically using a term that

*white society* might use to describe the speaker. Calling themselves a "savage," the speaker nods to the way white people have historically deemed people of color less civilized than themselves (and have used such beliefs to justify horrors like slavery). Of course, readers know the speaker is far from a "savage." The speaker possesses "courage" and "grace," maintaining their dignity and self-control in the face of blatant discrimination. Despite adopting an air of moral superiority, then, those who would call the speaker "savage" are ignorant and prejudiced. *They* are the ones acting like savages—not the speaker.

The mention of "the decent street" is also meant to be ironic. The street is "decent," the poem implies, because it's meant for white people. It certainly doesn't feel "decent" to the speaker. On the contrary, its stones "burn" the speaker's feet, reflecting the hellish cruelty that infuses the "decent" pavement. Really, there's nothing "decent" about a street, or society, that closes its doors to people on the basis of their skin color.

#### Where Irony appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "A chafing savage, down the decent street;"



## VOCABULARY

**Discontent** (Line 2) - Dissatisfaction or unhappiness.

**Bear** (Line 4) - Tolerate.

**Passion** (Line 6) - Strong, powerful emotion.

**Rends** (Line 6) - Tears apart.

**Vitals** (Line 6) - Organs. The speaker is saying that their emotions are tearing them up inside.

**Chafing savage** (Line 7) - "Chafing" refers to the fact that the speaker is bristling with discomfort while walking down the "decent street." It might also suggest that the white people are chafed—annoyed or irritated—by the speaker's mere presence. "Savage," meanwhile, is a nod to the kind of racist language historically used to deride people of color, implying that they're less civilized than white people. The speaker is using the term [ironically](#).

**Shuttered** (Line 8) - Closed off.

**Wrathful bosom** (Line 10) - Angry heart.

**Sore** (Line 10) - Pained with anger.

**Letter of your law** (Line 12) - White society's rules.

**Inviolable** (Line 13) - Free from injury/harm.

**Potent** (Line 14) - Powerful.





## FORM, METER, & RHYME

### FORM

"The White House" is a Shakespearean [sonnet](#). It contains 14 lines, which can be broken into three quatrains (four-line stanzas) and a final rhyming couplet. The sonnet form is fitting for "The White House" for several reasons.

For one thing, sonnets are often reflective, argument-driven poems that contain a shift in thought or direction known as the poem's turn or *volta*.

- In Shakespearean sonnets, the volta typically appears in the couplet: the poem's final lines respond in some way to the previous 12. Here, the speaker explains in the couplet that they strive to control their rage not just because they don't want to get in trouble, but also because they don't want to stoop to white society's level; the speaker is trying to protect their heart from the "potent poison" of "hate."
- That said, there's another, arguably stronger, shift in thought in line 9, when the speaker transitions from describing the pains of racism to describing how they strive to control their anger. Thematically, then, the poem can also be split into an octave (eight-line stanza) and a sestet (six-line stanza). (While this breakdown is more common in Petrarchan sonnets, some Shakespearean sonnets do have voltas in line 9.)

Sonnets also have a strict set of formal rules and follow a regular [meter](#) and [rhyme scheme](#). The sonnet rules mirror the "letter of the law" to which the speaker must hold themselves. The speaker also strives to "bear" their righteous anger "proudly and unbent." The sonnet form functions as a neat container in which to place the speaker's powerful emotions.

Finally, the sonnet is a famously *European* form, tracing its roots back to 13th-century Italy (and, of course, made famous in English by William Shakespeare). McKay subverts this traditionally white literary form by using it to describe Black experience.

### METER

"The White House" uses [iambic pentameter](#), the traditional [sonnet](#) meter. This means each line consists of five metrical feet known as iambs, which follow an unstressed-stressed syllabic pattern (da-DUM). Most lines of "The White House" conform to this meter perfectly. Here it is in action in the opening quatrain:

Your door | is shut | against | my tight- | ened face,  
And I | am sharp | as steel | with dis- | content;

But I | possess | the cour- | age and | the grace  
To bear | my ang- | er proud- | ly and | unbent.

The steady, stately meter evokes the speaker's composure in the face of grave injustice.

There aren't many variations in the poem, but note how line 10 swaps a [trochee](#) for the first iamb:

Deep in | my wrath- | ful bos- | om sore | and raw,

This emphasizes just how "deep" the speaker must dig into their own heart in order to maintain their self-control.

### RHYME SCHEME

"The White House" follows the standard [rhyme scheme](#) of a Shakespearean sonnet:

ABAB CDCD EFEF GG

The rhymes are all full and clear. Along with the poem's very steady meter, this predictable pattern adds to the poem's measured, dignified tone. The poet has full control over the sounds of the poem, which mirrors the way that the speaker controls their own emotions in order to survive.



### SPEAKER

The speaker of "The White House" stands in for the millions of Black Americans systemically and legally denied equal rights, freedoms, and opportunities. Given the poem's subject and context, it's reasonable to assume that the speaker's views reflect those of McKay himself. The speaker is a Black person who resents having to swallow their justified anger at being discriminated against. They're aware that to unleash their rage would be to transgress the laws of the dominant white society (infuriatingly, the same laws that maintain racist discrimination). They also don't want to stoop to the level of their oppressors; they want to protect their "heart" from being infected with the "poison of your hate."



### SETTING

The poem takes place in the United States. The speaker describes being shut out from a white house and trying to suppress their rage while walking "down the decent street" on which the house sits. This setting isn't literal, however. Instead, the house is a [metaphor](#) for the dominant white society. Being shut out of that house represents the way Black people are denied equal access to the rights, freedoms, and opportunities that white people have.

The fact that this metaphorical house has shining glass doors suggests that it's *proud* of such discrimination; it doesn't have anything to hide. The word "decent," meanwhile, is [ironic](#). The

street seems good only because those in power have deemed it so. To the speaker, there's nothing "decent" about a neighborhood (or country) that judges people on the basis of their skin color.



## CONTEXT

### LITERARY CONTEXT

"The White House" grew out of the creative context of the [Harlem Renaissance](#), a movement that Claude 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.

"The White House" is a perfect example of his interest in this subject, first appearing in the avant-garde magazine *The Liberator* in 1922. The poem's title proved controversial, with an editor changing it to "White Houses" for a 1925 issue of *Survey* magazine in order to avoid sounding like the name of the president's residence (a change McKay vehemently opposed, [declaring](#) that it "changed the whole symbolic intent and meaning of the poem").

"The White House" is a [sonnet](#), a classic poetic form that dates back to 13th-century Italy and was popularized in English by William Shakespeare. While many other Harlem Renaissance poets like Langston Hughes departed from the formal and stylistic conventions of European poetry in order to set forth a tone that they felt was more authentic to the Black experience, McKay fused the traditions of European poetry with his own perspective on the world. This stylistic choice is clear in "The White House," which uses [iambic pentameter](#) and a strict [rhyme scheme](#) to describe the psychological effects of racial injustice.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The United States in which Claude McKay published "The White House" 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.



## MORE RESOURCES

### EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [The Poem Out Loud](#) — Listen to a reading of the poem. ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tikCjM2if\\_8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tikCjM2if_8))
- [Biography of Claude McKay](#) — Read a biography of Claude McKay at the Poetry Foundation. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/claude-mckay>)
- ["The White House" in The Liberator](#) — See the poem as it originally appeared in *The Liberator* magazine and learn more about why McKay vehemently opposed changing the title. (<https://sites.utexas.edu/ransomcentermagazine/2017/02/16/claude-mckay-and-the-white-house/>)
- [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>)
- [McKay's Voice](#) — Listen to Claude McKay read several of his other well-known poems. ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L\\_xpilVoWuo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L_xpilVoWuo))
- [The Harlem Renaissance on Video](#) — Watch a brief video introduction to the Harlem Renaissance and the 1920s cultural context in which McKay wrote "The White House." (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9gboEyrjO2g>)

### LITCHARTS ON OTHER CLAUDE MCKAY POEMS

- [America](#)
- [Harlem Shadows](#)
- [If We Must Die](#)
- [The Harlem Dancer](#)
- [The Tropics in New York](#)



## HOW TO CITE

### MLA

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### CHICAGO MANUAL

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