

Name: _____ Class: _____

America

By Claude McKay
1921

Festus Claudius "Claude" McKay (1889-1948) was a Jamaican-American novelist and poet who played an important role in the Harlem Renaissance--a cultural, social, and artistic movement that took place in Harlem, New York. "America" was first published in The Liberator in 1921, in which the speaker discusses his or her feelings about America. As you read, identify the poem's figurative language that communicates the speaker's perspective on America.

- [1] 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.
- [5] 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
- [10] Of terror, malice,¹ not a word of jeer.²
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.



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1. **Malice (noun):** desire to inflict injury, harm, or suffering on another, either because of a hostile impulse or out of deep-seated meanness
2. **Jeer (noun):** vocal mocking scorn

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which of the following best describes the speaker's feelings about America? [RL.6]
 - A. The speaker has experienced both good and bad things in America, and thus remains indifferent.
 - B. The speaker despises America and has decided to speak out about their bad experiences.
 - C. The speaker has a love-hate relationship with America, but ultimately has lost faith in the country.
 - D. The speaker dislikes and has lost faith in America and believes that it will not last as it is.

2. PART B: Which of the following quotes best supports the answer to Part A? [RL.1]
 - A. "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." (Lines 1-4)
 - B. "Her vigor flows like tides into my blood, / Giving me strength erect against her hate" (Lines 5-6)
 - C. "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." (Lines 8-10)
 - D. "Darkly I gaze into the days ahead, / And see her might and granite wonders there" (Lines 11-12)

3. PART A: In line 11, the word "darkly" is most likely used to convey which of the following? [RL.4]
 - A. The word "darkly" conveys the speaker has an overall cynical opinion of America.
 - B. The word "darkly" conveys the speaker's general fear of time.
 - C. The word "darkly" conveys the speaker's uncertainty about the future of America.
 - D. The word "darkly" conveys that the speaker does not actually know anything about America.

4. PART B: Which of the following phrases supports the answer to Part A? [RL.1]
 - A. "I gaze into the days ahead" (Line 11)
 - B. "might and granite wonders" (Line 12)
 - C. "the Touch of Time's unerring hand" (Line 13)
 - D. "priceless treasures sinking in the sand" (Line 14)

5. Consider the imagery used to describe “she” or “her.” How do these images contribute to the overall meaning of the poem? [RL.4] [RL.2]

Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. During the time of the Jim Crow Laws, many black American's struggled with the idea of living in the "land of the free" but being denied basic human rights. How does McKay's poem "America" reflect this experience?

2. In the context of this poem, what makes America unique? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.

3. Do you think that this poem is still relevant today? Explain your answer.