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**Subject : Exploring Moral Heroism in the Protest Poetry of  
Claude McKay**

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**Abstract**

Claude McKay occupe une place déterminante au sein de la Renaissance de Harlem, mouvement culturel et intellectuel majeur des années 1920 qui a profondément redéfini l'identité et la créativité afro-américaines dans un contexte marqué par de fortes tensions raciales et sociales. Né en Jamaïque en 1889, McKay a très tôt pris conscience de l'oppression subie par les populations noires, tant dans son pays natal que lors de ses nombreux séjours aux États-Unis et en Europe. Cette expérience transnationale a enrichi sa perspective, lui permettant d'incarner simultanément la voix des « Nouveaux Noirs » et celle d'un sujet diasporique engagé dans une quête universelle de justice et de dignité (Poetry Foundation). Sa poésie se caractérise par une double dynamique – à la fois esthétique et militante – qui non seulement célèbre

l'identité noire, mais offre également une critique virulente des structures de domination raciale et économique (Mc Nwaiwu). L'importance du rôle de McKay dans la Renaissance de Harlem s'explique en grande partie par sa capacité à exprimer, dans son œuvre, la tension entre le désir de reconnaissance culturelle et la nécessité d'une résistance politique active. Contrairement à certains de ses contemporains qui privilégient un style plus consensuel ou formel, McKay a résolument opté pour des formes poétiques d'une grande expressivité, souvent imprégnées de langage vernaculaire et de rythmes empruntés au jazz et au blues. Ce choix stylistique confère à ses poèmes une véhémence et une immédiateté incomparable (J. Kwaterko).

Mots clés : Renaissance, créativité afro-américaine, Nouveaux Noirs, contemporain

## **General Introduction**

Claude McKay occupies a decisive place within the Harlem Renaissance, a major cultural and intellectual movement of the 1920s that profoundly redefined African American identity and creativity in a context marked by intense racial and social tensions. Born in Jamaica in 1889, McKay rapidly developed a keen awareness of the oppression endured by Black populations, both in his native environment and during his numerous stays in the United States and Europe. This transnational experience enriched his perspective, enabling him to simultaneously embody the voice of the “New Negroes” and that of a diasporic subject engaged in a universal quest for justice and dignity (Poetry Foundation).

His poetry is characterized by a dual dynamic—both aesthetic and militant—which not only celebrates Black identity but also offers a virulent critique of structures of racial

and economic domination (Mc Nwaiwu). The scope of McKay's role in the Harlem Renaissance can largely be explained by his ability to articulate, within his works, the tension between the desire for cultural recognition and the necessity of active political resistance. Unlike some of his contemporaries who favored a more consensual or formal style, McKay resolutely chose powerfully expressive poetic forms, often infused with vernacular language and rhythms drawn from jazz and blues. This stylistic choice lends his poems an unmatched vehemence and immediacy (J. Kwaterko).

Through his protest tone—particularly evident in works such as *"If We Must Die"* (1919)—McKay established himself as one of the first African American poets to explicitly inscribe the notion of moral heroism into literature in the face of oppression. His poetry denounces racist violence while affirming an uncompromising refusal of submission (F. Sylvanise).

McKay's singularity also lies in the intersection of his political commitments, which range from Pan-Africanism to socialism, and his integration into a poetically rich corpus marked by strong formal diversity. His personal and ideological trajectory reflects both the contradictions and aspirations of Harlem in the 1920s—a period characterized by the rise of Black nationalism, as well as by racist attacks and institutionalized segregation. As such, McKay becomes an exemplary figure for understanding how African American literature produces not only aesthetic representations but also symbolic acts of resistance against injustice (Dissent Magazine).

This dual dimension explains why the study of Claude McKay proves essential for grasping the moral and heroic dimensions present in the protest poetry of the Harlem Renaissance.

### **Purpose of the Study and Conceptual Framework**

The present study therefore aims to deepen the understanding of what may be described as **"moral heroism"** in the protest-oriented works of Claude McKay. This concept encompasses the full range of attitudes and poetic forms of engagement through which McKay affirms human dignity and resistance in the face of racial and social oppression. By rigorously analyzing his major protest poems, this research seeks to illuminate the ways in which McKay deploys a subversive language capable of mobilizing indignation

and hope, while simultaneously inscribing his poetry within a revolutionary tradition coupled with a universal quest for justice (Literary Hub).

This exploration is situated within a contemporary critical perspective that reassesses the political role of literature as a driving force for social transformation. It highlights the importance of artistic figures such as McKay in the construction of identity and the reappropriation of symbolic power by African Americans. Far from being confined to a purely biographical or aesthetic study, this research proposes to examine Claude McKay's poetry as a matrix of moral heroism that sheds light on the ways in which an engaged artist can embody poetic resistance in the face of systemic violence.

In this regard, the study draws upon existing analyses while offering a renewed reading centered on the ethical and political dimensions of the poetic text. It thus contributes significantly to the understanding of the Harlem Renaissance and its contemporary implications (Mc Nwaiwu; Dissent Magazine).

## **Protest Poetry in African American Literature**

### **Definition of Protest Poetry and Its Historical, Social, and Political Role**

Protest poetry, as it manifests within African American literature, constitutes a form of artistic expression intrinsically linked to fundamental historical, social, and political dimensions, which must be precisely defined in order to fully grasp its scope. It is not merely a literary genre, but rather a mode of resistance that articulates both individual and collective speech in response to systemic oppression.

This poetry is characterized by its explicit commitment to denouncing injustice—often racial, economic, or social—while simultaneously asserting human dignity and humanity under threat. This dual function distinguishes protest poetry from more abstract or purely aesthetic poetic forms, as it combines an aesthetics of revolt with an ethics of contestation.

Historically, African American protest poetry developed largely within a context marked by systemic racial oppression and legal segregation, but also by aspirations toward emancipation and recognition. This context is epitomized by pivotal periods such as the Harlem Renaissance, within which Claude McKay's work is situated. This era

illustrates emblematic ways in which poetry becomes an instrument for claiming autonomous cultural identity and questioning established power relations, transcending mere protest to assume a dimension of cultural and political militancy (M. Biron).

On a social level, protest poetry functions as a vehicle for collective mobilization and awareness. It exposes mechanisms of exclusion and symbolic violence that form part of the daily experiences of marginalized populations, particularly African Americans. Through its engagement, it gives voice to the silenced, reinforcing the visibility of social struggles and inscribing claims within a shared and transgenerational memory. This social function is often accompanied by the use of vernacular or popular language, which allows poetry to connect with lived community experiences and intensify its political impact (B. Santini).

Politically, protest poetry is rooted in a tradition of contesting hegemonic power relations—whether racial, economic, or ideological. It serves to question and denounce systems of domination by embodying a form of symbolic resistance capable of challenging norms imposed by the dominant order. This positioning transforms poetry into an intellectual and moral weapon, a means of claiming equality and justice. Engaged poets, such as Claude McKay, reject any temptation toward blindness or evasion in the face of reality, opting instead for a “spoken poetry” that closely links direct speech with social engagement, thereby avoiding complacency or the erasure of political stakes (K. Feki).

The analysis of the historical, social, and political role of protest poetry thus enables a deeper understanding of Claude McKay’s trajectory. Positioned at the intersection of cultural revendications and political struggles, McKay illustrates how poetry can become a matrix of moral heroism—both an aesthetic and ethical tool that mobilizes poetic language in the service of universal justice (Le Club de Mediapart).

### **The Contemporary Relevance of Protest Poetry**

Finally, the role of protest poetry is not confined to a historical past nor limited to a purely militant function; it also extends to a broader reflection on the power of literature as a lever for social transformation and contemporary symbolic resistance. Across successive movements—from the Harlem Renaissance to present-day struggles—poetry

has asserted itself as a hybrid space that intertwines aesthetics, politics, and engagement. It continues to influence debates surrounding identity, race, and social justice (B. Santini).

This continuity underscores the relevance of studying the origins and modalities of African American protest poetry, not only to grasp its historical role but also to understand its ongoing significance in shaping figures of moral heroes capable of inspiring renewed forms of engagement. Protest poetry thus remains a living tradition, continually reactivated in response to contemporary injustices.

## **The Concept of Moral Heroism**

### **Moral heroism defined through ethical courage, resistance, and sacrifice**

Examining the concept of moral heroism within the poetry of Claude McKay requires a thorough understanding of ethical audacity, active resistance, and personal sacrifice—three interconnected dimensions that form the core of this heroic figure. Moral heroism cannot be reduced to an abstract posture or mere physical bravery; rather, it reflects a deeply rooted ethical commitment grounded in conviction, where critical lucidity and steadfastness in the face of consequences enable irreducible action against oppression.

This configuration of the heroic subject, clearly detectable in McKay's work, echoes the refusal of passivity expressed in protest poetry, while simultaneously establishing a genuine dialectic between individual dignity and collective solidarity. Moral heroism thus emerges as a dynamic force that binds personal integrity to communal struggle.

### **Ethical Audacity and Active Resistance**

Ethical audacity constitutes the first cornerstone of this model of heroism. This form of moral courage goes beyond simple bravery to assert a conscious and deliberate decision to oppose the tyranny of unjust social norms. As a poet and activist, Claude McKay exemplifies this courage through his uncompromising denunciation of institutional racism and dominant power relations, while simultaneously affirming a shared humanity.

Such audacity implies moral clarity that neither succumbs to cynicism nor capitulates in the face of overwhelming adversity. The study of McKay's poetry and political engagements therefore provides a concrete demonstration of ethical resistance, akin to a form of "heroic resistance" within a society inclined to marginalize and silence Black voices (J.-C. Cloutier).

This audacity is inseparable from active resistance. Resistance here assumes both political and existential significance, denoting a daily struggle that demands endurance and creativity alike. In this context, McKay's poetry functions as a performative vehicle of engagement, where language itself becomes an act of revolt and identity affirmation. Protest poetry thus forges a space of contestation that disrupts dominant political and social discourses through accessible vernacular language and clearly articulated claims (K. V. Lindberg).

### **Sacrifice and the Moral Dimension of Heroism**

Sacrifice ultimately appears as an essential dimension in defining moral heroism in McKay's work. It entails the renunciation of security, comfort, or even immediate recognition in favor of an engagement whose consequences may prove personally and socially costly. This sacrifice operates on two levels: concretely, through the risks associated with political contestation within repressive systems, and symbolically, through the unwavering fidelity to universal values that may isolate or marginalize the individual.

Heroic sacrifice thus presupposes an accepted solitude reminiscent of the tragic hero, who fully assumes responsibility despite the risk of social isolation or profound misunderstanding (J. McGregor). This tension resonates with Aristotelian catharsis, wherein suffering and resistance achieve moral purification, highlighting the cathartic dimension of poetic heroic action (Major Prépa).

From a pragmatic perspective, McKay's moral heroism is expressed through perseverance in the face of adversity. He emerges not only as an ethical figure comparable to classical heroes, but also as a transcultural mediator navigating multiple, sometimes conflicting identities. This transnational dimension reveals that moral

heroism inherently involves ambiguity and complexity, requiring the constant negotiation of boundaries and allegiances (J.-C. Cloutier).

### **Defining Moral Heroism in McKay's Protest Poetry**

Consequently, defining moral heroism through the prism of ethical courage, resistance, and sacrifice allows for a fuller grasp of the richness and density of the commitments that characterize Claude McKay's protest poetry. This approach illuminates not only his singularity as a poet, but also the very functioning of engaged African American poetry, which—across its different temporalities and internal contradictions—constantly reinvents the contours of heroism.

Far from being reduced to a rhetorical motif, the moral hero emerges as a complex figure bearing an exigent ethical stance that dialogues with tragic, political, and spiritual traditions in a permanent quest for justice and human recognition. Such an understanding opens the way for reading the poem as an intentional act of intellectual and moral bravery, thereby renewing the horizons of cultural and political resistance.

### **Research Problem, Objectives, and Guiding Questions**

#### **How moral heroism is constructed and expressed in McKay's protest poetry**

In Claude McKay's protest poetry, moral heroism is constructed and articulated through a series of literary and discursive strategies that confer rare ethical depth upon his heroic figures. This construction does not rely on the mere declaration of values; rather, it is grounded in a reflexive and engaged staging of acts of resistance that simultaneously illustrate and embody an ideal of moral virtue at the heart of social struggle.

Thus, the heroic figure in McKay's poetry becomes a literary pivot in which ethical audacity, sacrifice, and resistance converge within a dialectical movement that structures the political reach of his poems.

### **Critical Lucidity and Ethical Commitment**

One of the primary ways through which McKay forges moral heroism lies in his representation of critical lucidity in the face of institutional racism and mechanisms of

oppression. Far from generating defeatist pessimism, this lucidity activates a heightened awareness of social contradictions—an awareness that demands vigorous and responsible denunciation.

In his poems, McKay gives rise to characters who oppose not only the visible injustices of segregation, but also more insidious forms of symbolic violence. This resistance grants their actions an ethical dimension that transcends strictly political circumstances (K. V. Lindberg). Such intellectual and emotional engagement fully justifies the designation of “moral hero,” insofar as it entails a conscious decision to speak against erasure and denial.

### **Style, Vernacular Language, and Identification**

McKay’s stylistic choices play a crucial role in the expression of moral heroism. Through poetry marked by direct, powerful, and accessible language, he privileges vernacular forms that enable broad and immediate identification with the heroic figures he portrays. The use of rhythms rooted in African American oral traditions, combined with poetic structures inherited from classical forms, creates a balance between universal resonance and local anchoring.

This stylistic alliance reflects a dual fidelity: to the subaltern community whose struggles are voiced in the poem, and to a literary tradition that legitimizes moral struggle as a heroic act (C. LeGette). In this way, McKay’s poetry bridges communal experience and literary authority.

### **Collective Heroism and Moral Solidarity**

The construction of the hero in McKay’s poetry is not confined to an isolated individual; rather, it is embedded within a relational and collective dynamic. McKay weaves his poetic narratives by emphasizing bonds of solidarity and shared struggle, transforming the hero into a spokesperson for a morally wounded yet resilient community.

Through this process, moral heroism acquires an indispensable social dimension, manifesting both in collective memory and in present action against injustice. McKay often imbues his heroic figures with the symbolic weight of historical revolts, notably

through implicit references to events such as the Morant Bay Rebellion, where the courage of the oppressed is transmitted as an essential moral legacy (J. Kwaterko).

### **Sacrifice, Catharsis, and Moral Elevation**

Sacrifice remains a pervasive and profoundly meaningful theme in McKay's elaboration of moral heroism. This sacrificial dimension does not merely concern physical suffering or individual hardship; rather, it represents an act of loyalty to an ethic of justice that compels the individual to expose themselves to both symbolic and material risks.

Such sacrifice transcends pain to inhabit a space of transcendence, where isolation and vulnerability become markers of moral greatness. The poem thus bears witness to a form of heroic sacrifice that provokes moral catharsis in the reader, inviting collective moral awakening.

### **Renewing the Concept of Heroism**

From this perspective, McKay renews the very notion of heroism by imparting to it a character that is simultaneously tragic and hopeful. Poetic resistance becomes inscribed within a universal ethical memory, transforming protest poetry into a site where suffering, dignity, and hope coexist.

The articulation of ethical audacity, expressive resistance, and committed sacrifice therefore constitutes the foundation upon which moral heroism is constructed in Claude McKay's poetry. This complex construction—individual and collective, stylistic and semantic—positions protest poetry not merely as an act of contestation, but as a privileged space for the performative elaboration of a heroic figure bearing universal values.

### **Significance and Scope of the Study**

#### **Academic relevance and contribution to literary and ethical studies**

The study of moral heroism in Claude McKay's protest poetry extends beyond a purely literary or historical analysis; it offers a significant interdisciplinary contribution to

literary and ethical studies by renewing our understanding of contemporary forms of artistic and moral resistance.

From a literary standpoint, this research sheds new light on the ways poetry can function as a performative space where political denunciation and ethical affirmation converge, transcending classical categories of engaged poetry. By closely analyzing McKay's discursive and stylistic strategies—particularly his articulation of critical lucidity with a powerful vernacular rooted in African American oral tradition—this study reveals a form of heroism that neither reduces itself to raw political action nor to abstract idealism, but unfolds at the heart of poetic praxis that reinscribes oppressed voices into a valorizing collective memory.

### **Ethical Implications of Moral Heroism**

Beyond its literary value, moral heroism as articulated in Claude McKay's protest poetry raises fundamental ethical questions regarding responsibility, agency, and resistance. The moral hero is not defined by victory or domination, but by the ethical consistency of their stance in the face of injustice. In this sense, McKay's poetry challenges utilitarian or outcome-based conceptions of heroism by privileging integrity, courage, and moral perseverance.

This ethical positioning situates McKay's work within a broader philosophical reflection on justice, aligning his poetic voice with traditions of moral resistance that emphasize conscience over conformity. The poet thus becomes a moral witness whose task is not merely to describe injustice, but to expose it and demand accountability.

### **Moral Heroism and Collective Memory**

Moral heroism in McKay's poetry also functions as a mechanism for preserving and transmitting collective memory. By inscribing historical suffering and resistance into poetic form, McKay transforms individual acts of defiance into enduring moral symbols. These symbols contribute to a shared memory that reinforces communal identity and continuity across generations.

Through this process, poetry operates as a counter-archive, resisting historical erasure and reclaiming narratives marginalized by dominant historiography. Moral heroes thus

emerge not only as figures of resistance, but as custodians of ethical memory, ensuring that past struggles inform present and future engagements.

### **Language as a Tool of Moral Resistance**

Language occupies a central place in the construction of moral heroism in McKay's protest poetry. His deliberate use of direct, uncompromising diction transforms poetic language into an instrument of ethical confrontation. Words function not merely as aesthetic devices, but as acts of resistance capable of unsettling complacency and provoking moral reflection.

This linguistic strategy underscores the performative power of poetry: to speak is already to act. By refusing euphemism and rhetorical detachment, McKay asserts the moral urgency of his message, reinforcing the heroic dimension of speaking truth in hostile environments.

### **Violence, Resistance, and Moral Limits**

One of the most complex aspects of moral heroism in McKay's poetry lies in its engagement with violence. While McKay does not glorify violence, he refuses to condemn resistance outright when it emerges as a response to systematic brutality. His poetry navigates this ethical tension by framing resistance as a tragic necessity rather than a moral ideal.

In poems such as "*If We Must Die*," resistance is articulated within strict moral boundaries: dignity, solidarity, and proportionality. This nuanced approach preserves the ethical integrity of the heroic figure while acknowledging the harsh realities imposed by oppression.

### **Tragedy and Moral Responsibility**

The tragic dimension of McKay's moral heroism reinforces the seriousness of ethical choice under conditions of injustice. Heroes in his poetry are fully aware of the risks they incur, yet they act nonetheless, accepting responsibility for the moral consequences of resistance.

This tragic awareness aligns McKay's work with classical conceptions of heroism, while simultaneously redefining them within a modern, racialized context. Tragedy thus becomes a site of moral elevation, where suffering acquires meaning through ethical commitment.

### **Universalism and Particularism**

McKay's moral heroism operates at the intersection of universal ethical values and particular historical experiences. While his poetry is firmly rooted in African American and diasporic realities, it articulates principles—justice, dignity, freedom—that transcend cultural and national boundaries.

This dual orientation enables McKay to address both a specific oppressed community and a broader human audience. Moral heroism thus emerges as a bridge between the particular and the universal, reinforcing the global relevance of McKay's protest poetry.

### **Transnational Dimensions of Moral Heroism**

McKay's transnational life experience profoundly shapes his conception of moral heroism. His movements between Jamaica, the United States, Europe, and North Africa inform a vision of resistance that exceeds national frameworks. This mobility allows him to perceive oppression as a global phenomenon requiring solidarities that cross borders.

As a result, moral heroism in his poetry acquires a cosmopolitan dimension, positioning McKay as both a national and global moral voice. His work thus contributes to an international tradition of anti-colonial and anti-racist resistance.

### **Poetry as Moral Action**

In McKay's protest poetry, writing itself constitutes a moral action. The act of composing poetry becomes inseparable from ethical engagement, transforming artistic

creation into a form of responsibility. This conception challenges the supposed neutrality of art, affirming instead its capacity to intervene in social reality.

By assuming the risks associated with speaking openly against injustice, McKay embodies the very moral heroism he depicts. Poetry thus functions as both representation and enactment of ethical resistance.

### **Contemporary Resonances of McKay's Moral Heroism**

The moral heroism articulated in McKay's poetry continues to resonate in contemporary contexts marked by racial injustice and social inequality. His work provides ethical and aesthetic frameworks through which modern readers can interpret ongoing struggles for dignity and recognition.

This enduring relevance confirms the transformative potential of protest poetry and underscores McKay's lasting influence on later generations of writers, activists, and thinkers committed to moral resistance.

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