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## Harlem Renaissance Literary Productions: Context, Role, Philosophy and Objective In “The Negro’s Tragedy”

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### Abstract

This paper aims to show and analyze how through “an outstanding poetic creation”, Claude McKay describes clearly the context, role, philosophy and objective of the Harlem Renaissance literary productions while describing his own role and vocation as an African American writer. Indeed by describing his own role as a pioneer of the Harlem Renaissance Movement, “this assertive poem” is actually a précis and paradigm of the motives and chart gathering all those black pioneer writers engaged in this literary movement. This paper provides, through the hermeneutic study of this symptomatic sonnet about the Negro’s tragedy; an analysis of the context in which the Harlem Renaissance literary productions had been produced, the role of those literary productions, the main philosophy surrounding the literary productions of this Black Movement and finally the objective targeted by those literary productions. The hermeneutic approach is sustained by the socio-criticism, African American criticisms and stylistics theories to better characterize the semantic and social scope of this poem.

Keywords: Harlem Renaissance, Literary Productions, Context, Role, Philosophy, Objective, Negro's tragedy, Ethnic Literature

## 1. Introduction

The poem entitled "The Negro's Tragedy" is a sonnet written by Claude McKay (1889-1948) a pioneering-poet of Harlem Renaissance. This poem is a symptomatic testimony about his role and vocation as an African American writer namely in terms of ethnic literature. In this sonnet, he tells and explains his aim and objective as an African American writer, and also that of his literary productions. But the most striking thing is that this poem through an insight reading allegorically moves us from the microcosm "I" to the macrocosm "we" by conveying, explaining and informing us about the specific aims of the literary productions by the group of black writers known as the Harlem Renaissance writers.

Being part of Harlem Renaissance Movement, producing and promoting an ethnic literature, the simple fact to explain his own role as an African American writer and the objective/role of his writings in this poem; Claude McKay sheds light indirectly or directly on the major role and vocation of the entire group of black writers composing the Harlem Renaissance Movement.

Some of the writers involved in the renaissance were poets, Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, and Claude McKay; in these poets works there are distinctive characteristics of the Harlem Renaissance that are present. The main characteristics that all three writers include in their works is social activism<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.123helpme.com/characteristics-of-the-harlem-renaissance-in-the-works-of-langston-hughes-countee-cullen-and-claude-mckay-preview.asp?id=286652>. VISITED ON 4 July 2020.

By this way, the engagement he asserts for his community is the same the group of the Harlem Renaissance writers asserts for the black community. Because this poem in its core issues deals with the different and main concerns of all the generation and group of African American writers of the Harlem Renaissance as if it was itself the definition of the notion of ethnic literature.

In the 1920's, creative and intellectual life flourished within African American communities in the North and Midwest regions of the United States, but nowhere more so than in Harlem. The New York City neighborhood, encompassing only three square miles, teemed with black artists, intellectuals, writers, and musicians. Black-owned businesses, from newspapers, publishing houses, and music companies to nightclubs, cabarets, and theaters, helped fuel the neighborhood's thriving scene. Some of the era's most important literary and artistic figures migrated to or passed through "the Negro capital of the world," helping to define a period in which African-American artists reclaimed their identity and racial pride in defiance of widespread prejudice and discrimination.<sup>2</sup>

It is quite clear that the meaning of this "allegoric" sonnet<sup>3</sup> goes beyond the simple fact to write for a community, it is really an assertive poem which clarifies the role of any black writer living during the period and committed to defend his community.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/145704/an-introduction-to-the-harlem-renaissance>. VISITED ON 4 July 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Allegory: symbolic work: a work in which the characters and events are to be understood as representing other things and symbolically expressing a deeper, often spiritual, moral, or political meaning. Allegory,

As if representing or talking on behalf of the Harlem Renaissance Movement, we realize finally that in this poem, Claude McKay explains clearly the Harlem Renaissance literary productions clarifying the context in which those literary productions had been produced, the role targeted by those literary productions, the philosophy which had encapsulated those literary productions and even the main objective of those literary productions.

Indeed, when transcending his own assertion in this poem, we realize that the poet McKay (one of the leading figure of the Harlem Renaissance) has managed to capture in this same poem some of the major characteristics of the Negro Renaissance. That is why a thorough analysis of the poem, permits us to observe that this poem is like<sup>4</sup> “The Constitution” of the Harlem Renaissance Movement considering its literary productions thanks to its content.

The larger project and central problematic in this paper is therefore to answer specifically to the following question: How does the poem “The Negro’s Tragedy” represent “The Constitution” of the Harlem Renaissance literary productions through the message it conveys or through its semantic?

This central problematic in order to be solved will also revolve around one important and central question which will constitute the blueprint of our analysis: How does the poem “The Negro’s Tragedy” explain the context, the role, the philosophy and the main objective of the literary productions by the Harlem Renaissance writers?

To answer to this question, the theoretical background that will be used will be theories such as hermeneutics (meaning the critical interpretation and analysis of the content,

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which encompasses such forms as fable, parable, and apologue, may have meaning on two or more levels that the reader can understand only through an interpretive process. <https://www.britannica.com/art/allegory-art-and-literature>.

<sup>4</sup> May be considered as “The Constitution”.

semantic, and message of the poem); African American criticism (meaning the critical analysis of the content, semantic of the poem considering the role of ethnic literature and the fact that group of black writers produced firsthand accounts of their lives in face of white people racism); and stylistics (meaning that the critical interpretation of the content and semantic will be sustained by the critical analysis of rhetoric, form, image, metaphor, and the structure of the poem which is a sonnet).

This study will revolve around four key parts that will constitute the blueprint of our analysis:

First of all, the beginning of the poem (the title and the two first verses, V1 and V2) will be used to present and explain the context in which and why the Harlem Renaissance writers have outpoured such literary productions.

Secondly, the third and fourth verses of the poem (V3 and V4) will be used to present and explain the role of the literary productions of the Harlem Renaissance as well as that of the writers.

Thirdly, in the same poem, and through the two following stanzas (from V5 to V12), we are informed about the philosophy which had underpinned the Harlem Renaissance writers and their literary productions.

And finally, in its two last verses (V13 to V14), this sonnet sheds light on the main objective of the Harlem Renaissance literary productions as well as the main objective of the writers of this movement.

## 2. Context of the Harlem Renaissance Literary Productions

In this lyrical and committed sonnet<sup>5</sup>, the poet Claude McKay, since the expressive and meaningful title and also through the two first verses presents the general social climate,

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<sup>5</sup> Poem composed of 14 verses or lines (short poem).

the general social atmosphere and in a word the context in which he was obliged to produce his own protest literature (his literary productions) and major poems in United States. Moreover, as a pioneering-poet of Harlem Renaissance, by doing so, he recalls by the same way also the general atmosphere or the general context in which the Harlem Renaissance writers have outpoured their literary productions. And concerning this general context he is quite clear when he says: “V1 It is the Negro’s tragedy I feel / V2 Which binds me like a heavy iron chain,”

We observe that at the outset of this poem and since its title, McKay informs the readers and the world that there is a problem and this problem is the Negro's tragedy. In other words, the Negro is undergoing a tragedy that is why the poem is entitled explicitly "The Negro's Tragedy" so that any reader should know that this poem is about the Negro’s tragedy. And this is the reason why he is writing and it is the context in which he writes. It is the situation which obliges him to write, to be engaged and committed in writings through the Harlem Renaissance. So in conclusion and in other words, the general context of the Harlem Renaissance literary productions is the Negro’s tragedy.

The symbolic use of the meaningful expression "the Negro's tragedy" to present the context in which and why he is writing at that moment and during this period shed light on the overall Negro situation and problem in the United States of America and in the world.

Indeed, taking the context which had favored the Harlem Renaissance itself in substance, blueprints, core value and in most of the literary productions of the period<sup>6</sup>, we can admit that it was time for the Negro and with a urgent need “to go behind the white man’s definitions”<sup>7</sup> of black people. This implies to correct the “wrong image of the Blacks as portrayed by the Whites” by “decreating the stereotypes presented by the White writers about

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<sup>6</sup> We mean here by this expression “most of the literary productions of the period” the literary productions of the major African American writers of this movement such as Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen etc.

<sup>7</sup> James Baldwin, *The fire next time*, p.9.

Africa and Africans” simply because there was an atmosphere of white supremacy versus black inferiority and white people “have had to believe for many years, and for innumerable reasons, that black men are inferior to white men.”<sup>8</sup>

The White writer has invented and perpetuated a stereotype of the African which depicted him as "physically unattractive, intellectually incompetent and spiritually degraded. Africans, according to the Whites are barbarians, born slaves, great singers, loyal servants, hard workers and true Christians. Only very low and inferior roles are assigned to the Blacks. The African is considered to be a conglomeration of mere arms and limbs, bones and eyes and as meaningless as his forests, rivers and silence.<sup>9</sup>

Such ideas of “a worthless human being”<sup>10</sup> and of “an inferior black man” surrounding this quotation were indeed the main motives that encouraged the Negro writers or the African writers and namely the Harlem Renaissance writers to think it was time for “singing their own praises and creating a black consciousness”. That is why this cultural movement was also known as the “The New Negro Movement” or “The New Negro Renaissance”. In other words, those other appellations or identifications through the expressions “New Negro Movement” or “New Negro Renaissance” are highly characterized by a major change of value in terms of the characterization of the Negro human being because they make a difference between an “Old Negro” and a “New Negro” both in the form and in the content.

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<sup>8</sup> James Baldwin, *The fire next time*, pp. 8-9.

<sup>9</sup> [https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/64079/7/07\\_chapter%201.pdf](https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/64079/7/07_chapter%201.pdf) / CHAPTER ONE / ASSERTIVE BLACK POETS/ p. 7. VISITED ON 4 July 2020.

<sup>10</sup> “The limits of your ambition were, thus, expected to be set forever. You were born into a society which spelled out with brutal clarity, and in as many ways as possible, that you were a worthless human being. You were not expected to aspire to excellence: you were expected to make peace with mediocrity.” James Baldwin, *The fire next time*, p. 7.

The Blacks realize the urgent need for singing their own praises and creating a black consciousness. Yet again, as Sartre observes: These black men are addressing themselves to black men about black men. Their poetry is neither satiric nor imprecatory; it is an awakening to consciousness...' To correct the wrong image of the Blacks as portrayed by the Whites becomes the ultimate motive of the African writers. The Afro-American writers aim at decreasing the stereotypes presented by the White writers about Africa and Africans. The average European imagines Africa as monotonous and bleak. To the White readers, Africa remains, by and large, a dark continent with no meaning, shape or coherence<sup>11</sup>.

So in clear terms, the context was a context of denial and nihilism of Africans and African Americans' status as human being. That is why; this Harlem Renaissance Movement will aim at "singing their own praises and creating a black consciousness", a kind of revival of African Culture and its expression through many artistic forms like music, dancing and poetry.

**Harlem Renaissance**, a blossoming (c. 1918–37) of African American culture, particularly in the creative arts, and the most influential movement in African American literary history. Embracing literary, musical, theatrical, and visual arts, participants sought to reconceptualize "the Negro" apart from the white stereotypes that had influenced black peoples'

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<sup>11</sup> [https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/64079/7/07\\_chapter%201.pdf](https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/64079/7/07_chapter%201.pdf) / CHAPTER ONE / ASSERTIVE BLACK POETS/ pp. 5-6. VISITED ON 4 July 2020.

relationship to their heritage and to each other. They also sought to break free of Victorian moral values and bourgeois shame about aspects of their lives that might, as seen by whites, reinforce racist beliefs... Harlem Renaissance poets such as Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, and Georgia Douglas Johnson explored the beauty and pain of black life and sought to define themselves and their community outside of white stereotypes.<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, we can admit that due to the general atmosphere of the Negro's tragedy; it was of course important "to reconceptualize the Negro" and in this perspective the lexemes "the New Negro Movement" and "the New Negro Renaissance" associated to both the period and the movement were very important for this movement and the period and were clear to understand. Because they<sup>13</sup> define and describe that there was something really new in the history of African Americans descent in the USA as "a spiritual coming of age" for African American artists and thinkers, who seized upon their "first chances for group expression and self-determination", hence, the notion of New Negro itself.

the Old Negro had long become more of a myth than a man. The Old Negro, we must remember, was a creature of moral debate and historical controversy. His has been a stock figure perpetuated as an historical fiction partly in innocent sentimentalism, partly in deliberate reactionism. The Negro himself has contributed his share to this through a sort of protective social mimicry forced upon him by the adverse

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/event/Harlem-Renaissance-American-literature-and-art>. VISITED ON 4 July 2020.

<sup>13</sup>"the New Negro Movement" and "the New Negro Renaissance".

circumstances of dependence. So for generations in the mind of America, the Negro has been more of a formula than a human being --a something to be argued about, condemned or defended, to be "kept down," or "in his place," or "helped up," to be worried with or worried over, harassed or patronized, a social bogey or a social burden. The thinking Negro even has been induced to share this same general attitude, to focus his attention on controversial issues, to see himself in the distorted perspective of a social problem. His shadow, so to speak, has been more real to him than his personality. Through having had to appeal from the unjust stereotypes of his oppressors and traducers to those of his liberators, friends and benefactors he has subscribed to the traditional positions from which his case has been viewed. Little true social or self-understanding has or could come from such a situation.<sup>14</sup>

Considering this open context or atmosphere of the Negro's tragedy described above we can clearly comprehend why in his poem, both the title and the first verse (V1) mention the notion of the Negro's tragedy and why even the poem itself through its title is conceived to be about the Negro's tragedy. Of course the title is clearly stipulated "The Negro's Tragedy"<sup>15</sup> and it is very important to imagine or conceive this Negro's tragedy and say that it can be broadly characterized by an environment in which:

- The African is depicted as "physically unattractive, intellectually incompetent and spiritually degraded."

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<sup>14</sup> Alian Locke, *The New Negro*, Second Paragraph.

<sup>15</sup> Claude McKay, "The Negro's Tragedy," in *Selected Poems\** (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1953), p. 50.

- Africans are stereotyped as “barbarians, born slaves, great singers, loyal servants, hard workers and true Christians.”
- “The African is considered to be a conglomeration of mere arms and limbs, bones and eyes and as meaningless” as denounced later in 1952 by Ralph Ellison in his novel *Invisible Man* where he states that “I am an invisible man ...I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids.”<sup>16</sup>

And this Negro’s tragedy may be characterized by an environment in which anti-Black attitudes were associated with Jim Crow racism, The Jim Crow social order, a society based on deliberate segregation by race, anti-Black discrimination in economics, education, and politics:

for generations in the mind of America, the Negro has been more of a formula than a human being --a something to be argued about, condemned or defended, to be "kept down," or "in his place," or "helped up," to be worried with or worried over, harassed or patronized, a social bogey or a social burden

So in clear terms, the lexeme “the negro’s tragedy” used by the poet McKay is a suitable metaphor and a good image to symbolize all the predicaments of the black people at the hands of white people, all the stereotypes, all the bad and wrong images about Negroes or black people.

It is this shameful atmosphere or climate of the Negro’s tragedy which will oblige Claude McKay to be engaged and committed in literary productions and mainly in protest

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<sup>16</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (the Second Vintage International Edition of March 1995, Copyright renewed 1980 by The Ralph and Fanny Ellison Charitable Trust, Vintage Book Edition), p. 3.

poetry that is why he says it clearly when saying: “It is the Negro’s tragedy I feel / Which binds me like a heavy iron chain,”<sup>17</sup>:

Having heard favorable reports of the work of Booker T. Washington, McKay enrolled at the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama with the intention of studying agronomy. It was here that he first encountered the harsh realities of American racism, which would form the basis for much of his subsequent writing<sup>18</sup>... One of his poems, a sonnet, “If We Must Die,” (1919) written during the Red Summer was a response to the racial violence against African Americans.<sup>19</sup>

Of course the meaningful and symptomatic expression “the Negro’s tragedy” both in the title and in the first verse is a good image and a significant metaphor to caricature the situation of the Negro at this time if not today also because it is still today question to ask ourselves if blacks lives matter in the United States of America. Indeed, for the poet McKay, there is exactly a "Negro's tragedy" when since long time; white men dehumanize the Negro, the negroes suffer predicaments at the hands of white people, the portrayal of Africa and Africans is something of “primitive”, the status and worth of the Africans and African Americans human beings is viewed as “a worthless human being” or “inferior to white men.” And this “Negro’s tragedy” symbolically mentioned by McKay both in the title and in the very first verse of his sonnet in other words encompasses all those ideas mentioned above and

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<sup>17</sup> Verses 1-2: Claude McKay, "The Negro's Tragedy," in *Selected Poems\** (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1953), p. 50.

<sup>18</sup> Henry Louis Gates (Jr.), and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Harlem Renaissance Lives from the African American National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2009 , p. 342.

<sup>19</sup> This Day In History: May 22 Claude McKay and Langston Hughes on [https://blog.oup.com/2008/05/may\\_22/](https://blog.oup.com/2008/05/may_22/). VISITED ON 4 July 2020.

recalls the notion of “devastation”<sup>20</sup> that James Baldwin evokes when talking about the sufferings of black people since their contact with white people. That is why it was important for the ideology of this group of African American writers to emerge and “explode the stereotypes and vitalize African literature” and also “impress on the fellow Africans that they are just as good as others in all respects.”<sup>21</sup>

Long oppressed and handicapped through slavery and then neglect, which have forced them into a limited channel of existence, the Negroes considered as the oldest American minority, have gathered stores of emotion and are ready to burst forth with new eloquence, once they discover adequate medium: “a fresh and fierce sense of reality to their vision of human life on this continent” in view of all they have endured from the majority<sup>22</sup>

Being a significant figure in the literary movement of the Harlem Renaissance and being also a pioneering-poet of Harlem Renaissance, we can admit that it is exactly such a context of "Negro's tragedy" which had fostered the Harlem Renaissance Movement or the New Negro Movement or again the New Negro Renaissance. And we can clearly or substantially modify the two first verses (V1 and V2) from the microcosm “I” to the macrocosm “we” by rewriting them the following way when we consider that Claude McKay is their spokesman: “V1 It is the Negro’s tragedy the Harlem Renaissance writers feel / V2 Which binds them like a heavy iron chain.” It is important therefore after the analysis and

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<sup>20</sup> “But it is not permissible that the authors of devastation should also be innocent. It is the innocence which constitutes the crime” in James Baldwin, *The fire next time*, p. 5.

<sup>21</sup> [https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/64079/7/07\\_chapter%201.pdf](https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/64079/7/07_chapter%201.pdf) / CHAPTER ONE / ASSERTIVE BLACK POETS/ p. 8. VISITED ON 4 July 2020.

<sup>22</sup> Statement made during the Civic Club gathering organized by the newspaper *Opportunity* where Carl Van Doren was invited to give his viewpoint on the Cultural Phenomenon which happened in the City of Harlem.

presentation of the context in which the Harlem Renaissance writers have outpoured their literary productions to focus on the role of those literary productions. In other words, what is the role of the literary productions of the Harlem Renaissance as well as the role of the Harlem Renaissance writers?

### 3. Role of the Harlem Renaissance Literary Productions

Divided into four stanzas made up of three quatrains (3X4) and one couplet (1X2), the two first verses of the first quatrain deal with the context of the Harlem Renaissance literary productions and the other two last verses (V3 and V4) of the first stanza deal with the role of the poet McKay as well as the role of his literary productions as member of the Harlem Renaissance writers. While dealing with his own role as an African American writer, those two verses also deal with the role of the other Harlem Renaissance writers as well as with the role of their literary productions. Because the role of the poet McKay (as a pioneer of the Harlem Renaissance) is the same role intended by all the Harlem Renaissance Negro writers. And as far as this role is concerned, the poet McKay says:

V1 It is the Negro's tragedy I feel (a)

V2 Which binds me like a heavy iron chain, (b)

V3 It is the Negro's wounds I want to heal (a)

V4 Because I know the keenness of his pain. (b)

Using this brief poetic form which is the sonnet to express himself, Claude McKay rapidly and directly in his first stanza states both the context which obliges and encourages him to write as a pioneering-poet of Harlem Renaissance. But also, he states bluntly his role and the role he deserves to his writing as well as the role he deserves to their writings as a

group of Negroes writers composing the Harlem Renaissance by saying: (V3 “It is the Negro’s wounds I want to heal / V4 Because I know the keenness of his pain”).

Being a sonnet and being obliged to be direct and to encode his message, McKay uses this significant expression to state his major role as a black writer. In these verses, our focus will be on the expression: “It is the Negro’s wounds I want to heal” or in a better way on the expression “I want to heal the Negro’s wounds” which is characterized by the concept: “To heal the Negro’s wounds”.

Indeed, the expression used to identify the role of Claude MacKay or the role of the Harlem Renaissance writers and that of their literary productions is most symptomatic to a particular field which is the field of medicine or the medical sphere that we may observe through the typical words: “To heal” and “wounds”. And this aspect and particularity of medical sphere or medicine is very important because it is in this domain that a human being is kept in life and cured from any kind of disease by doctors, it is there that particular people (doctors) save particular people’s life (sick people).

So practically speaking, “to heal” means “cure somebody or something from ailment: to restore a person, body part, or injury to health” or “be repaired naturally: to be repaired and restored naturally, e.g. by the formation of scar tissue”. But it also means in other context and domain “put something right: to repair or rectify something that causes discord and animosity” and “be morally purified: to get rid of a wrong, evil, or spiritual affliction”.<sup>23</sup>

And the word “wounds” practically speaking means “injury to body: an injury in which the skin, tissue, or an organ is broken by some external force such as a blow or surgical incision, with damage to the underlying tissue” or “injure: to cause a wound in the body of somebody or something, especially using a knife, gun, or other weapon”. But it also means in other context and domain “emotional injury: a lasting emotional or psychological injury” and

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<sup>23</sup> Microsoft® Encarta® 2009. © 1993-2008 Microsoft Corporation. Tous droits réservés.

“cause emotional wound: to cause somebody emotional or psychological distress by saying or doing something”<sup>24</sup>

That is why in our context and in this study those words and the expression “to heal the Negro’s wounds” should be understood both literally, metaphorically and symbolically because on the one hand; both denotation and connotation are all part of the meaning or play to the semantic. And on the other hand; the fundamental role of the Harlem Renaissance productions and that of its writers is symbolically, metaphorically and literally “to heal the Negro’s wounds”.

Literally speaking, through the expression “to heal the Negro’s wounds” or “to heal the wounds of the Negro”; we should understand that the Harlem Renaissance writers play the role of doctors to cure their people’s wounds and their literature play the role of a medicine to give good health to their community. So here Claude McKay and the Harlem Renaissance writers are the doctors of the Negro people, or they play the role of doctors for the Negro people. Through their literary productions they play the role of doctors for the negro community meaning they are doctors and their literary productions are the medicines.

De manière générale, après lecture du sonnet « The Negro’s Tragedy », nous notons que le thème général qui se dégage porte sur la vocation de poète de l’écrivain Claude McKay. Il s’agit d’une vocation qui s’inscrit dans une perspective d’écrivain-thérapeute ou de « poète-médecin » qui écrit une poésie thérapie qui se donne pour but de « soigner » la société et en l’occurrence de « soigner » ou « guérir » le noir et la communauté noire américaine. Ainsi, il clarifie sa fonction ou son rôle d’écrivain-poète avec des objectifs précis. C’est ainsi que Claude McKay

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se donne à lui un rôle de médecin de la société dans sa littérature ou tout simplement se fait médecin de la société utilisant du coup un vocabulaire emprunté au domaine de la médecine pour expliquer son rôle d'écrivain et le but de sa poésie. (...) En effet, loin de nous conter la tragédie du noir, Claude McKay nous désoriente lorsqu'il oriente son texte sur son rôle ou sur sa mission en rapport avec la tragédie noire. Cette mission qui se traduit par le fait qu'il sent le besoin de guérir la tragédie noire, le mal noir, les blessures du Noir, les problèmes du Noir. De ce fait, le titre en lui-même devient polysémique en ce sens qu'il nous dit d'une part qu'il y a « tragédie noire », et d'autre part qu'il faut guérir cette « tragédie noire ». C'est donc dans ce besoin de « guérir » ou « soigner » cette tragédie noire que la nécessité du « poète-médecin » se fait sentir et se précise puisque pour guérir cette tragédie noire, il nous faut bien évidemment un médecin d'autant plus que le rôle du médecin, c'est de soigner et même de guérir. La nécessité désormais de soigner et de guérir, et non plus d'en parler comme le suggérait le titre du texte ou poème, oblige le poète Claude McKay, dans son premier quatrain, à revêtir les habits du médecin, ou de manière plus concrète à se faire ou se transformer en « poète-médecin » pour guérir la tragédie noire. (...) C'est ainsi que, dans une troisième étape, il se donne de manière claire, précise et directe, le rôle d'écrivain-médecin, et dans ce cas précis, le rôle de « poète-médecin » au niveau du vers 3 : « It is the

Negro's wounds I want to heal ». De manière littérale, le choix des mots et de l'expression de « soigner les blessures » ou de « guérir les blessures » en est une preuve palpable.<sup>25</sup>

Metaphorically speaking, through the expression “to heal the Negro's wounds” or “to heal the wounds of the Negro”; we should understand that this expression refers to first the fact to denounce all the problems of the negro people socially, psychologically, politically, economically, culturally, etc. It refers to second the fact to combat all the problems of the negro people socially, psychologically, politically, economically, culturally, etc. It refers to third the fact to solve all the problems of the Negro people socially, psychologically, politically, economically, culturally or to repair all the predicaments of the Negro people, etc.

Sur le plan de la création littéraire, les étapes de sentir le mal ou le problème, d'être hanté, vouloir guérir et donc d'écrire puisqu'on connaît le mal se traduisent de manière métaphorique fondamentalement en ces quatre premiers vers de son poème. Ainsi l'on retiendra que le vers 1 correspond au fait de connaître les maux de la société ou ce dont souffre la société ; ces maux se résumant de manière symbolique à l'expression « the Negro's tragedy ». Le vers 2 correspond à l'appel à l'engagement et à son devoir d'écrivain qui se doit d'être engagé et donc de juger et critiquer la société par le biais d'une création littéraire. Le vers 3 correspond à cette littérature engagée et à la dénonciation des maux et problèmes de la société (les relations sociales,

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<sup>25</sup> Stéphane BEUGRE et Acho Patrice ADOUPO, « L'ECRITURE COMME UNE MEDECINE : CAS DU «POETE MEDECIN»i CLAUDE MCKAY DANS «THE NEGRO'S TRAGEDY » » in *LITTÉRATURE ET MÉDECINE ACTES DU COLLOQUE DE BOUAKÉ DU 12 AU 13 SEPTEMBRE 2018*, REVUE LE CAÏLCÉDRAT Numéro 006, 2018, pp. 207-209. Différance Pérenne.

politiques, économiques, raciales ambiguës entachées d'injustices, d'inégalités, de racisme entre Blancs et Noirs dans la société américaine). Le vers 4 correspond au désastre que ces différents maux de la société créent sur la condition des noirs aux Etats-Unis.<sup>26</sup>

And symbolically speaking, through the expression “to heal the Negro’s wounds” or “to heal the wounds of the Negro”; we should understand that, this expression means to restore the negro, to honor the negro, to reevaluate the negro, to promote the negro, to “explain and illuminate the Negro condition”, to “put something right”, to rectify something, to morally purify the negro, etc.

Il est par conséquent clair ici que, sentir le mal ou le problème, être hanté, vouloir guérir et donc écrire parce qu'on connaît le mal ; représentent de manière générale le contexte qui oblige McKay à être un « poète-médecin » d'où la nécessité de produire un art-thérapie qui pense et panse la société et plus précisément la société américaine dans laquelle il vit.(...) Cette posture de l'écrivain engagé qui pense et panse la société à travers son écriture afin de dénoncer, critiquer, et apporter des solutions aux problèmes de la société est la même qu'adoptent plusieurs écrivains. (...) Cet engagement de l'écrivain devient encore plus précis quand il est question du cas particulier de la littérature ethnique noire américaine qui engage les auteurs noirs

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<sup>26</sup> Stéphane BEUGRE et Acho Patrice ADOUPO, « L'ECRITURE COMME UNE MEDECINE : CAS DU «POETE MEDECIN»i CLAUDE MCKAY DANS «THE NEGRO'S TRAGEDY » » in *LITTÉRATURE ET MÉDECINE ACTES DU COLLOQUE DE BOUAKÉ DU 12 AU 13 SEPTEMBRE 2018*, REVUE LE CAÏLCÉDRAT Numéro 006, 2018, p. 210. Différance Pérenne.

américains dans un combat de défense des droits et intérêts de la communauté noire américaine vivant aux Etats-Unis. Par exemple, nous avons les cas de Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin etc.<sup>27</sup>

The fact to move from the literal to the metaphorical then to the symbolical spheres of definition and meaning concerning the expression “to heal the Negro’s wounds”; we observe that this same expression thanks to an ascending gradation takes many senses and all those senses are justified by the expression “the Negro’s wounds”. Concerning the expression “the Negro’s wounds” itself, we can say that the fact to be at the plural and to cover both the “injury to body” and the “emotional injury” permits us to say that this expression covers a wide scope of “wounds” or it covers of all the “wounds” of the Negroes. Because through those many tragedies of the Negroes, it is obvious that the Negro has many “wounds” that we can list and categorize as follow:

the wound of being stereotyped, the wound of being condemned, the wound of being discriminated, the wound of being segregated, the wound of being massacred, the wound of being lynched, the wound of being murdered, the wound of being enslaved, the wound of being colonized, the wound of being ill-treated, the wound of being uprooted, the wound of being raped, the wound of being exploited, the wound of being harassed, the wound of being long oppressed, etc.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Stéphane BEUGRE et Acho Patrice ADOUPO, « L’ECRITURE COMME UNE MEDECINE : CAS DU «POETE MEDECIN»i CLAUDE MCKAY DANS «THE NEGRO’S TRAGEDY » » in *LITTÉRATURE ET MÉDECINE ACTES DU COLLOQUE DE BOUAKÉ DU 12 AU 13 SEPTEMBRE 2018*, REVUE LE CAÏLCÉDRAT Numéro 006, 2018, pp. 211-214. Différance Pérenne.

<sup>28</sup> A précis of Negroes’ tragedies taken from literary texts used in quotation in this paper and mentioned before this part.

the wound of being inferior, the wound of being invisible, the wound of being worthless, the wound of being forced into limited channels of existence, the wound of being neglect, the wound of being "kept down", the wound of being kept "in his place", the wound of being a social bogey, the wound of being a social burden, the wound of being handicapped through slavery, etc.<sup>29</sup>

The fundamental role of the Harlem Renaissance writers and literary productions being symbolically, metaphorically and literally "to heal the Negro's wounds"; in terms of literature and as for the role of the Harlem Renaissance writers, we better understand those two verses ("It is the Negro's wounds I want to heal / Because I know the keenness of his pain") as the valuable and expression of committed writers for committed literature for really an ethnic literature in its main definition.

Major developments occurred in the 1920s that challenged entrenched ideas of white supremacy and Black inferiority. The Garvey movement, organized in 1920, rapidly became the largest mass movement Black America ever produced. Its main message was that Black people, Black culture, history and Africa were noble and that Black people had created great civilizations that rivaled Western civilization on every front. Garvey preached Blacks should return to Africa. This praising of things Black flew the face of white hegemonic beliefs. Large numbers of African Americans were receptive to

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<sup>29</sup> A précis of Negroes' tragedies taken from literary texts used in quotation in this paper and mentioned before this part.

this message. Otherwise the Garvey movement could have developed into a major mass movement. **The Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s was a major literary movement that carried a similar message.** This movement produced what has come to be characterized as **protest literature**. It aimed at creating a "New Negro" who was proud of her Black heritage and prepared to fight for Black liberation. This protest theme was clearly represented in lines of Claude McKay's poem "If We Must Die" where he declared, "Oh, Kinsmen! We must meet the foe/ Though far outnumbered, let us show us brave/ And for their thousand blows deal one deathblow!" (McKay 1963:31)<sup>30</sup>

And here when referring to the literal explanation above, we can admit the expression and verse ("It is the Negro's wounds I want to heal") as related to the full role of doctors those writers play in their community, and also to the full role of medicines their literary productions play for their community. That is why one of the most important figure of the Harlem Renaissance officially recognizes it here when saying: "My seeking has been to explain and illuminate the Negro condition in America and obliquely that of all human kind,"<sup>31</sup> and it should be recognized that:

What they did was to attempt to express what the masses of their race were then feeling and thinking and wanting

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<sup>30</sup>Aldon D. Morris, "A Retrospective on the Civil Rights Movement: Political and Intellectual Landmarks", *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 25 (1999), pp. 517-539, Annual Reviews. URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/223515>. VISITED ON 4 July 2020.

<sup>31</sup> <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/atd-herkimer-english2/chapter/biography-langston-hughes/>. VISITED ON 4 July 2020.

to hear. And so the distinguishing notes of their poetry were disillusionment, protest, and challenge—and sometimes despair...These revolutionary poets made black America fully aware of them<sup>32</sup>

Here also, when referring to this new literal explanation above, we can admit the expression and verse (“Because I know the keenness of his pain”) as the valuable expression of the Black writers as part and members of this community, as part of its sufferings, and as witnesses of this people predicaments. Therefore they are the ideal “doctors” of their community because as Negro writers their role and duties are to defend their Negro community, to talk on behalf of their Negro community. Simply because they are part of the Negro community and they are also part of all the sufferings of the Negro community. That is why it is said that “the agonies of others are the garments of a sensitive Black intellectual. Understandably therefore, the Black creationists cry over the lot of their race and try to create an awareness or consciousness of their race in the minds of the suffering Blacks.”<sup>33</sup>

The Black writer witnesses his people living under the shadow of "rope, fire, torture, castration, infanticide, rape; death and humiliation; fear by day and night, fear as deep as the marrow of the bone."<sup>34</sup> The Blacks experience denials, deprivation, dehumanization, misery, pain and angst at the hands of the Whites. As a race they

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<sup>32</sup> James Weldon Johnson, *Black Manhattan* (Studies in American Negro Life, New York: Atheneum, 1977), p. 263.

<sup>33</sup> [https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/64079/7/07\\_chapter%201.pdf](https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/64079/7/07_chapter%201.pdf) / CHAPTER ONE / ASSERTIVE BLACK POETS/ p. 11. VISITED ON 4 July 2020.

<sup>34</sup> Nathan A. Scott Jr, "Black Literature," in *Harvard Guide to Contemporary American Writing*, Ed. Daniel Hoffman (Delhi: OUP, 1981), p. 302.

have been exploited for centuries. Richard Wright records in cryptic fashion the condition of the Black man thus: Held in bondage, stripped of his own culture, denied family life for centuries and made to labour for others. . .<sup>35</sup>

Being a significant figure in this literary movement of the Harlem Renaissance and also a pioneering-poet of Harlem Renaissance, we can admit that it is exactly such a role of "healing the Negro's wounds" which was the role of the Harlem Renaissance writers and also that of their literary productions. And we can clearly modify the first stanza from the microcosm "I" to the macrocosm "we" by rewriting it the following way when we consider that Claude McKay is their spokesman:

V1 It is the Negro's tragedy the Harlem Renaissance writers feel (a)

V2 Which binds them like a heavy iron chain, (b)

V3 It is the Negro's wounds the Harlem Renaissance writers want to heal (a)

V4 Because the Harlem Renaissance writers know the keenness of his pain. (b)

After this analysis concerning the role of both the writers and the literary productions of the Harlem Renaissance, it will be very interesting according to the evolution of the poem source to tackle with the philosophy which had underpinned the Harlem Renaissance writers and their literary productions.

#### 4. PHILOSOPHY OF THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE LITERARY PRODUCTIONS

By philosophy concerning the Harlem Renaissance literary productions, it is better to understand the guiding or underlying principles of the Harlem Renaissance writers (the set of

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<sup>35</sup> [https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/64079/7/07\\_chapter%201.pdf](https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/64079/7/07_chapter%201.pdf) / CHAPTER ONE / ASSERTIVE BLACK POETS/ p. 10. VISITED ON 4 July 2020.

basic principles or concepts underlying this particular group of Negro writers). And moreover, it is the set of beliefs or aims characterizing their literary productions, meaning the set of precepts, beliefs, principles, or aims, underlying their practice, actions, conduct and literary productions.

In a word, it is interesting to know how that group of writers thinks, or how Claude McKay thinks in terms of “New Negro Renaissance<sup>36</sup>” and in terms of “New Negro Renaissance” literary productions. And to answer to that concern about the general mindset characterizing them in this adventure of writing during the Harlem Renaissance period, and also in this enterprise of writing together as a group expression of Negro writers; the poet McKay promotes clearly the philosophy of an ethnic literature both in the form and in the content at several levels.

Indeed in practically 8 verses of his sonnet and with as much as possible clarity, McKay informs people about the philosophy of the Harlem Renaissance literary productions:

- V5 Only a thorn-crowned Negro and no white (a)
- V6 Can penetrate into the Negro’s ken (b)
- V7 Or feel the thickness of the shroud of night (a)
- V8 Which hides and buries him from other men. (b)
- V9 So what I write is shot out of my blood. (a)
- V10 There is no white man who could write my book  
(b)
- V11 Though many think the story can be told (a)
- V12 Of what the Negro people ought to brook. (b)

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<sup>36</sup> Another appellation of the Harlem Renaissance.

This specificity concerning the guiding or underlying principles of the Harlem Renaissance writers and their literary productions takes the major part of his sonnet (two stanzas) and puts forth the philosophy of an ethnic literature; the notion of a group engagement; the notion of a group of Negroes writers sharing the same vision, the same precepts, the same beliefs, and the same principles as far as their literary productions are concerned.

The fact that Claude McKay dedicates two stanzas of his sonnet to explain and talk about the philosophy of the Harlem Renaissance literary productions with many fundamental denotations and connotations and correspondences through symbolical lexemes, metaphorical lexemes and meaningful lexemes obliges us to focus on those 8 verses in a close reading.

And in terms of denotation, connotation, correspondences basing ourselves on the metaphorical and symbolical use of meaningful poetic codes in this group of verses, we can detect and sum up five (5) major principles or guidelines sustaining their literary productions:

- 1- First philosophy: **Only Negro and no white** (a)
- 2- Second philosophy: **Only Negro can penetrate into the Negro's ken** (a-b)
- 3- Third philosophy : **Only Negro can feel the thickness of the shroud of night which hides and buries Negro from other men** (a-b-a-b)
- 4- Fourth philosophy: **So what Negro writes is shot out of his blood** (a-b-a-b-a)
- 5- Fifth philosophy: **No white man could write the/a Negro book** (a-b-a-b-a-b)

It is very important to precise in terms of stylistics that the fact to move from (a) to (a-b) to (a-b-a-b) to (a-b-a-b-a) to (a-b-a-b-a-b) and finally with the two last verses to (a-b-a-b-a-b-a-b) (rhyming patterns) shows that these 8 verses are all interrelated, are all connected one by one in a progressive way. And it is the whole block of 8 verses taken as an entity which

gives sense and produces meaning related to both the philosophy of an ethnic literature; the notion of a group engagement; and finally, the notion of same vision, same precepts, same beliefs, and the same principles.

And here to better understand this beautiful aspect, one can rely on the beginning word of each verse or the “connecting word” of each verse to another one. The “connecting word” which puts in relationship each verse to the following one from the first one to the last one in the two stanzas: “Only – Can – Or – Which – So - There is – Though – Of”.

When coming back to these five (5) philosophies or principles guiding the Harlem Renaissance writers’ literary productions or to these 5 philosophies/principles guiding the poet McKay’s literary productions<sup>37</sup>; we can say that:

The philosophy of the Harlem Renaissance symbolizes the task only for the Negro writers excluding the white writers in this adventure or movement or commitment.

The philosophy of the Harlem Renaissance reaffirms the connection between the Negro writer and the black community, between the Negro writer and the Negroes plights and their predicaments, between the Negro writer and his role of committed writer, defender of his community, spokesperson of his community, representative of his community. And in this perspective we don’t see and imagine how a white man can be committed for the black community, be its defender, spokesperson and representative (principle 1 and principle 5).

The philosophy of the Harlem Renaissance reasserts the value of ethnic literature for minority and oppressed community and its importance and necessity in America by reaffirming the need for the Negro to think Negro, to speak Negro, to write Negro because he is a Negro (principle 2 – principle 3 and principle 4).

En effet, le cas de la littérature ethnique noire américaine doit être considéré comme l’une des spécificités de la

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<sup>37</sup> Those literary productions are represented by the poetic code or expression “what I write” in this block of 8 verses.

littérature médecine et il est d'ailleurs important pour le poète McKay, tout comme l'on le fait en médecine, avec les multiples disciplines, filières et spécialités de préciser que lorsqu'il s'agit d'être un écrivain-médecin (écrivain engagé) dans la société ou de produire une littérature médecine (art-thérapie) ; il existe aussi des spécialistes assermentés. Car n'importe qui ne peut écrire sur n'importe quoi ou plus précisément n'importe quel écrivain-médecin ne peut écrire n'importe quelle littérature médecine. C'est seulement les spécialistes ou écrivains-médecins d'une société précise qui peuvent écrire la littérature médecine de cette société malade ou en danger. Ainsi du vers 5 au vers 12 de rime finale (CDCD-EFEF), il se permet de faire cette précision de taille et donc nous introduit dans la sphère de la littérature ethnique noire américaine (...) Il est clair que pour traiter des préjudices, problèmes, des difficultés et de la souffrance de la société noire américaine, il faut la connaître et même en être membre. La relation entre l'écrivain noir américain et sa communauté, son interaction avec le peuple, sa prise de conscience du sort de sa communauté devient donc une partie ou une spécialité de la littérature médecine.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Stéphane BEUGRE et Acho Patrice ADOUPO, « L'ECRITURE COMME UNE MEDECINE : CAS DU «POETE MEDECIN»i CLAUDE MCKAY DANS «THE NEGRO'S TRAGEDY » » in *LITTÉRATURE ET MÉDECINE ACTES DU COLLOQUE DE BOUAKÉ DU 12 AU 13 SEPTEMBRE 2018*, REVUE LE CAÏLCÉDRAT Numéro 006, 2018, pp. 214-215. Différance Pérenne.

First coined as the "New Negro Movement"<sup>39</sup>, and later known officially as the Harlem Renaissance; we should say that this very first appellation of "New Negro Movement" or also of "New Negro Renaissance" is very significant for it encompasses the whole philosophy which has guided this movement and the period. Indeed, the major or fundamental philosophy of the Harlem Renaissance resides in the sole and unique fact that it was and still had been a Negro movement. Meaning the major characteristic was that it was identified with Negro writers or African American writers only as a group expression. And in terms of visual aspect, or mental picture it was such a visible group of Black writers, such a representation of Negro writers or such association of African American writers (Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Zora Neale Hurston, W.E.B. DuBois, Georgia Douglass Johnson, Marcus Garvey, Arna Bontemps ...)

The Harlem Renaissance is fundamentally a group of black literati, such as writers, poets, etc. that got together and decided to change the perception of blacks amongst whites in order to prove to whites that blacks could be just as capable as them in life.<sup>40</sup>

And at the very beginning this philosophy or principle of uniquely a Negro movement was already set up since it has been a group of black intellectuals and artists gathering. And it is throughout this major or fundamental philosophy that we have the other principles or the other detailed principles such as the philosophy of an ethnic literature; the notion of a group

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<sup>39</sup> "These forces converged to help create the "New Negro Movement" of the 1920s, which promoted a renewed sense of racial pride, cultural self-expression, economic independence, and progressive politics. <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/naacp/the-new-negro-movement.html>. VISITED ON 4 July 2020.

<sup>40</sup><https://www.123helpme.com/characteristics-of-the-harlem-renaissance-in-the-works-of-langston-hughes-countee-cullen-and-claude-mckay-preview.asp?id=286652>. VISITED ON 4 July 2020.

engagement; and finally, the notion of same vision, same precepts, same beliefs, and the same principles.

So the philosophy, guiding those literary productions, is that it is only Blacks who are “authorized” to write or whose writings are taken into account to represent the movement and not white people or white writers. That is why this philosophy or principle will be reasserted by Claude McKay (as a pioneering-poet of Harlem Renaissance) in this poem in a boomeranging structure so that the beginning (principle 1) becomes the end (principle 5) or so that the beginning is similar to the end because the principle 1 and the principle 5 share the same concern and the same idea:

principle 1----- First philosophy: **Only Negro and no white**

principle 5-----Fifth philosophy: **No white man could write the/a Negro book**

<b>Only Negro and no white</b>	<b>BECAUSE</b>	<b>No white man could write the/a Negro book</b>
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And the fact that, in this poem, this point, this aspect, this “major or fundamental philosophy and principle of the Harlem Renaissance”<sup>41</sup> is defended, reaffirmed and promoted by Claude McKay himself is a very good fact to avoid any amalgam or equivoque concerning the philosophy guiding the Harlem Renaissance writers and their literary productions:

V5 Only a thorn-crowned Negro and no white (a)

V10 There is no white man who could write my book

(b)

V11 Though many think the story can be told (a)

V12 Of what the Negro people ought to brook. (b)

<sup>41</sup> The major or fundamental philosophy of the Harlem Renaissance resides in the sole and unique fact that it was and still had been a Negro movement.

Indeed, the Harlem Renaissance can be characterized at the outset as a group of very sensitive black intellectuals and artists who had gathered in the name of race and color. And this aspect is very important and also should not be ignored because, for those sensitive black intellectuals and artists racial consciousness had become a part and parcel of their life. So they gathered in the name of race and color to give an unprecedented exposure to their problems, hopes and aspirations.

That is why in accordance with the philosophy of an ethnic literature; the notion of a group engagement; and finally, the notion of same vision, same precepts, same beliefs, and the same principles; this same block of 8 verses (verse 5 to verse 12) about the general and fundamental philosophy characterizing the Harlem Renaissance writers and literary productions may be reevaluated as following:

-As for the realistic precision but also the realistic truth about the notion of a group engagement, we have:

- V5 Only a thorn-crowned Negro and no white
- V6 Can penetrate into the Negro's ken
- V7 Or feel the thickness of the shroud of night
- V8 Which hides and buries him from other men.

The agonies of others are the garments of a sensitive Black intellectual. Understandably therefore, the Black creationists cry over the lot of their race and try to create an awareness or consciousness of their race in the minds of the suffering Blacks.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> [https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/64079/7/07\\_chapter%201.pdf](https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/64079/7/07_chapter%201.pdf) / CHAPTER ONE / ASSERTIVE BLACK POETS/ p. 11. VISITED ON 4 July 2020.

- As for the philosophy of an ethnic literature, we have:

V9 So what I write is shot out of my blood.

V10 There is no white man who could write my book

the group of very sensitive black intellectuals and artists who had gathered in the name of race and color, to give an unprecedented exposure to their problems, hopes and aspirations.<sup>43</sup>

As for the systematic exclusion of white race because of the notion of same vision, same precepts, same beliefs, and the same principles, we have:

V10 There is no white man who could write my book

V11 Though many think the story can be told

V12 Of what the Negro people ought to brook.

Enjoying a first hand knowledge of their ancestral homeland and cultural heritage, the African writers represent the sole authoritative voices to present African life. They alone can project the disappointments, frustrations and inexplicable sufferings of the Blacks. Only the Black creationists who understand the problems and sufferings of the Blacks could give a right expression to their feelings, thoughts and experiences. Claude

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<sup>43</sup><https://www.123helpme.com/characteristics-of-the-harlem-renaissance-in-the-works-of-langston-hughes-countee-cullen-and-claude-mckay-preview.asp?id=286652>. VISITED ON 4 July 2020.

McKay echoes this idea in his sonnet "The Negro's Tragedy":

Only a thorn-crowned Negro and no  
White  
Can penetrate into the Negro's Ken,  
Or feel the thickness of the shroud of  
night  
Which hides and buries him from other  
men<sup>44</sup>

Being a significant figure in the literary movement of the Harlem Renaissance and also a pioneering-poet of Harlem Renaissance, we can admit that through the poetic code “a thorn-crowned Negro”, Claude McKay as a spokesman means the group of the Harlem Renaissance writers and therefore is talking of themselves as a united group of Negro writers composing the New Negro Movement in those two stanzas. And the passage from the poetic code “a thorn-crowned Negro” V5 to the poetic code “the Negro people” V12 [beginning – end] in this block of verses puts forth the philosophy of an ethnic literature in general. And we can clearly or substantially modify the two stanzas from the microcosm “I” to the macrocosm “we” by rewriting them the following way when we consider that Claude McKay is talking on behalf of all the Harlem Renaissance writers:

- V5 Only a thorn-crowned Negro and no white (a)
- V6 Can penetrate into the Negro's ken (b)
- V7 Or feel the thickness of the shroud of night (a)
- V8 Which hides and buries him from other men. (b)

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<sup>44</sup> [https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/64079/7/07\\_chapter%201.pdf](https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/64079/7/07_chapter%201.pdf) / CHAPTER ONE / ASSERTIVE BLACK POETS/ pp. 9-10. VISITED ON 4 July 2020.

V9 So what the Harlem Renaissance writers write is shot out of their blood. (a)

V10 There is no white man who could write their book(b)

V11 Though many think the story can be told (a)

V12 Of what the Negro people ought to brook. (b)

Thanks to this last quotation and namely to the expression “So what I write is shot out of my blood./There is no white man who could write my book”, it will be important after the analysis of the philosophy underpinning the Harlem Renaissance writers and their literary productions to focus on the main objective of those literary productions. And the good question to answer is: what is the main objective of the Harlem Renaissance literary productions?

## 5. OBJECTIVE OF THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE LITERARY PRODUCTIONS

As usually in his sonnet, the two last verses constitute his conclusion or the conclusion of the topic (the concern, the title) he is dealing with. And here too also, we observe that in the two last verses of this sonnet (V13-14), the poet McKay states the conclusion of his topic “The Negro’s Tragedy”.

By stating the conclusion this way, he is telling at the same time the objective of his own literary productions as a member of the Harlem Renaissance. And we may observe also that through this same conclusion, and thanks to the literary device or the poetic code “Our statesmen”, he tells also by the same way the objective of all the Harlem Renaissance writers’ literary productions.

Doing so, (meaning the fact to tell the objective of all the Harlem Renaissance writers' literary productions) the poet Claude McKay is telling also the objective of this literature known as the African American ethnic literature. In a word, these two last verses (V13, V14) in this concern play many different roles which are: conclusion - objective of McKay's literary productions - objective of the Harlem Renaissance writers' literary productions - objective of the African American ethnic literature.

V13 Our statesmen roam the world to set things right. (a)

V14 This Negro laughs, and prays to God for Light! (a)

Identified as the "statesmen"<sup>45</sup>, a metaphor to mean that the Harlem Renaissance writers are committed writers who play the role of representatives and defenders of their Black community; they<sup>46</sup> have the main objective to "roam the world to set things right" meaning that their literary productions have the main objective "to set things right".

As part of the overall black protest movement, both the Garvey movement and the literary movement known as the Harlem renaissance played important roles. Throughout the 1920s they both contributed to undermining the ideology of white supremacy. They did so by honoring black people, black culture, black history and Africa. White supremacy maintained that black people and all things black, including Africa, were inferior to white Western civilization. The message from the Garvey movement and the Harlem Renaissance was

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<sup>45</sup> Normally means "leading politician" and here may refer to black political leaders. Leading politician: a senior politician, especially a man, who plays an important role in government or international affairs. Respected impartial senior male politician: a senior politician, especially a man, who is widely respected for integrity and impartial concern for the public good. Microsoft® Encarta® 2009. © 1993-2008 Microsoft Corporation. Tous droits réservés.

<sup>46</sup> The Harlem Renaissance writers.

that blackness and its heritage was something to be proud of and that the ideology of white supremacy had been created to rob black people of their intrinsic greatness, making it possible for white domination to continue. Both of these movements had a positive effect on Black consciousness because they promoted the historic oppositional consciousness of black people while attacking the hegemonic white consciousness<sup>47</sup>

In the verse “Our statesmen roam the world to set things right”, the semantic unit “to set things right” is of great importance. Because first of all, this semantic unit or expression “to set things right” is a kind of metaphor that the poet uses to refer to all the wrong deeds against black people, all the tragedies against black people and in our paper here, all the wounds<sup>48</sup> against Negroes. Secondly, this semantic unit or expression “to set things right” is a kind of litotes that the poet uses in order to say more about the plurality of the objectives of their writings and the plurality of their roles as African American writers whose community has suffered so much at the hand of white people.

To disprove this inscription of black inferiority, black political leaders pointed to the black artists in Harlem as evidence of the mistaken white view. James Weldon Johnson was quick to grasp the propaganda potential of the Harlem writers, whom he charged with the serious task of re-educating white opinion: But these younger

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<sup>47</sup> Herbert Hills and James Edward Jones, Jr., Part I: “The Past is prologue” in *RACE IN AMERICA The Struggle for Equality* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), p. 44.

<sup>48</sup> In the title or part “ROLE OF THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE LITERARY PRODUCTIONS” we mention different wounds the Negroes suffered from.

writers must not be mere dilettantes; they have serious work to do. They can bring to bear a tremendous force for breaking down and wearing away the stereotyped ideas about the Negro, and for creating a higher and more enlightened opinion about the race.<sup>49</sup>

And lastly, this semantic unit or expression “to set things right” is a kind of euphemism that the poet uses to avoid offending his white readers and audience (the majority, the supremacists) about the fact to counter-attack them in a pacific way about all the wrong deeds and negatives stereotypes they have maliciously cast over the black race. In a word, the first and main objective (or intention) of the Harlem Renaissance writers’ literary productions is of course “to set things right”, a kind of correction, a kind of counter-truth about their lives and existence.

To correct the wrong image of the Blacks as portrayed by the Whites becomes the ultimate motive of the African writers. The Afro-American writers aim at decreasing the stereotypes presented by the White writers about Africa and Africans.<sup>50</sup>

Harlem Renaissance poets such as Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, and Georgia Douglas Johnson explored the beauty and pain of black life and

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<sup>49</sup> Harold Bloom, *The Harlem Renaissance*, 2004 by Chelsea House Publishers. « Harlem and the First Black Renaissance » P.117.

<sup>50</sup> [https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/64079/7/07\\_chapter%201.pdf](https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/64079/7/07_chapter%201.pdf) / CHAPTER ONE / ASSERTIVE BLACK POETS/ pp. 5-6. VISITED ON 4 July 2020.

sought to define themselves and their community outside of white stereotypes.<sup>51</sup>

By setting “things right”, the Negro can laugh (“this Negro laughs”) instead of crying and mourning about his life. And by setting “things right”, the Negro can hope for a new future (“this Negro prays to God for Light”) in this majority of white people, in this hegemony of white people, in this world of white supremacy. Because we should not forget this harsh reality namely about the African Americans living in the United States of America and which is the fact that:

There is no radical the Negro's friend  
 Who points some other than the classic road  
 For him to follow, fighting to the end,  
 Thinking to ease him of one half his load.  
 What waste of time to cry: "No Segregation!"  
 When it exists in stark reality,  
 Both North and South, throughout this total  
 nation,  
 The state decreed by white authority.<sup>52</sup>

Broadly speaking, in these two last concluding verses we may summary through the expressions and semantic units “to set things right”, “this Negro laughs”, and “this Negro prays to God for Light!” the triple objectives and intentions of the Harlem Renaissance itself, the triple objectives and intentions of its writers and the triple objectives and intentions of their literary productions. And these triple objectives may be understood simply by means of

<sup>51</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/event/Harlem-Renaissance-American-literature-and-art>. VISITED ON 4 July 2020.

<sup>52</sup> Claude McKay, “The negro’s Friend”.

rhetoric as first to correct “things”, second to instill joy and happiness and third to hope for a better future of “light” and happiness in contrast of “darkness” and sorry.

In the renaissance blacks essentially made a new identity for themselves; known as the “new negro”, this included no longer allowing whites to treat them as if they were not humans; additionally they would breakdown the stereotypes of blacks and not let whites dictate them because of their color, past, or financial status <sup>53</sup>

There is ample evidence of a New Negro in the latest phases of social change and progress, but still more in the internal world of the Negro mind and spirit... Yet the New Negro must be seen in the perspective of a new World, and especially of a New America... the full significance of that even is a racial awakening on a national and perhaps even a world scale.<sup>54</sup>

The three positive things which are to “set things right”, to induce “laughs” and “to pray to God for light” are both assembled in the two last verses of the poem, the conclusion, a couplet characterized by the rhyming pattern (a-a) to show the positiveness of the three words “right”, “laugh” and “light”. But beyond this, it also shows that the aim of the Harlem Renaissance productions is a positive aim at the end. The rhyming pattern (a-a) at these two last verses gives therefore a harmony of ideas and objectives and reinforces the logic of a common and same objectives as far as the Harlem Renaissance writers are concerned as African American writers or/and as “statesmen” of the Negro community.

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<sup>53</sup> Gordon D Morgan, “Fisk University and the Intellectual Origins of the Harlem Renaissance”, *Western Journal of Black Studies*, v21 n3 p214-18 Fall 1997.

<sup>54</sup> Alain Locke, *The New Negro* (Studies in American Negro Life, New York: Atheneum, 1977), p. xv-xvii.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Extraordinarily, in these fourteen lines, and with a subtle title, the poet Claude McKay informs the reader about the context, the role, the philosophy guiding and the objective of the Harlem Renaissance literary productions symbolized by the expression or semantic unit “what I write” in the poem.

The Harlem Renaissance being the movement to which he belongs to as a pioneering-poet, by telling at a microcosm sphere the context, the role, the philosophy guiding, and the objective of his own literary productions, McKay tells by the same way at a macrocosm sphere the context, the role, the philosophy guiding, and the objective of the entire Harlem Renaissance literary productions.

The progressive semanteme and the method of literary creation he used to do so (2--2--8---2), not mixing ideas and going step by step has been a good one to help us identify the different verses and their different and particular concerns or themes. And thanks to such a literary creation, we observe that for each part or concern or theme, he has respected the equality of two (2) verses except for the theme concerning the philosophy guiding their literary productions; where he dedicated a huge number of verses eight (8). And it seems that this part is of great importance and has more value in accordance with the period and the context in which this literary movement began. It was important thanks to these 8 verses to characterize the literary movement and to tell a lot about the intrinsic forces sustaining them as a group of Negro writers and as an entity of group expression.

At the end of this paper, we can admit that this ideology of renaissance<sup>55</sup> which according to Nathan Irvin Huggins: “symbolizes black liberation and sophistication - the final shaking off of the residuals of slavery in the mind, spirit and character...confirming a

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<sup>55</sup> An ideology that we find through the expressions “Harlem Renaissance” and “New Negro Renaissance”.

people's culture and underwriting their identity and self-respect"; is well exemplified through the context, role, philosophy and objective of the Harlem Renaissance literary productions as described in this sonnet by Claude McKay and also as a positive movement.

It is quite clear that the context of a Negro group mass literary productions was exactly "the Negro's tragedy" at that time and due to such a context, those Negroes writers considered themselves as the statesmen of their community in accordance with their role as writers and therefore decided "to heal the Negro's wounds" simply as Negroes and as members of the Negro community because they "know the keenness of his pain".

This simple characteristic enhances the substance of an ethnic literature and namely an African American ethnic literature in which the recognition and philosophy were that "only a thorn-crowned negroes and no whites" writers feeling the sufferings of their community, have defined themselves the same objective which was to "set things right" and by doing so, to give "laugh" to Negro and hope for a new future of joy, happiness and "light".

So thanks to this allegorical reading<sup>56</sup> of the sonnet "The Negro's Tragedy" we can admit that the Harlem Renaissance is derived from a context of "Negro's tragedy" with the intention "to heal the Negro's wounds" and with the philosophy of being characterized only by negroes "Only a thorn-crowned Negro and no white" whose main objective was "to set things right", to give "laugh" to the Negro and promote a new future of "light" for the negro that is the message conveyed about the Harlem Renaissance by Claude McKay.

This poem at last in its lines symbolizes the major characteristics of the Harlem Renaissance group of Negro writers and that of their literary productions. And also the poem presents the Harlem Renaissance movement as a positive movement as well as its aim and the

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<sup>56</sup>Allegory, a symbolic fictional narrative that conveys a meaning not explicitly set forth in the narrative. Allegory, which encompasses such forms as fable, parable, and apologue, may have meaning on two or more levels that the reader can understand only through an interpretive process. <https://www.britannica.com/art/allegory-art-and-literature>. VISITED ON 4 July 2020.

aim of its literary productions have been broadly positive through the expressions: to “set things right”, to induce “laughs” and “to pray to God for light”. Even today in 2020, the Harlem Renaissance or the New Negro Renaissance is still of topical interest because blacks in the United States of America ask themselves if Blacks lives matter in this white dominated country in accordance with the numerous deaths and murders due to injustice and racism.

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