The Tropics in New York
An immigrant hungers for the ‘old, familiar ways’

For the complete video with media resources, visit:
http://education.nationalgeographic.org/media/tropics-new-york/

The Tropics in New York
by Claude McKay

Bananas ripe and green, and ginger-root,
    Cocoa in pods and alligator pears,
And tangerines and mangoes and grape fruit,
    Fit for the highest prize at parish fairs,

Set in the window, bringing memories
    Of fruit-trees laden by low-singing rills,
And dewy dawns, and mystical blue skies
    In benediction over nun-like hills.

My eyes grew dim, and I could no more gaze;
    A wave of longing through my body swept,
And, hungry for the old, familiar ways,
    I turned aside and bowed my head and wept.

Discussion Ideas
Learn about Claude McKay with our “Fast Facts,” and dig deeper into the poem with questions in the “Questions” tab. Questions for older students (questions 1-3) focus on the poem’s metaphors, while questions for younger readers (questions 4-5) focus on the emotions in the poem.

Questions
- Claude McKay uses metaphors to convey a sense of sadness and nostalgia in “The Tropics of New York.” In this case, metaphor is a literary device in which the poet compares a physical thing to an emotion or feeling. McKay uses three key metaphors in “The Tropics in New York”: tropics, window, and hunger.

What ideas are being compared by the metaphor “tropics”? (title)

McKay is comparing a geographical region to a representation of that region.
The tropics are regions extending from the Equator to the Tropic of Cancer (23.5°N) and the Tropic of Capricorn (23.5°S), far from the city and state of New York, whose latitude is about 40°N.

In “The Tropics of New York,” the tropics are represented by fruits and spices endemic to the region: bananas, ginger, cocoa. The tropics are also represented by the poet himself, and other immigrants from tropical regions. The poet’s feeling is one of isolation, loneliness, or not fitting in—like tropical fruit displayed in a temperate climate.

- What ideas are being compared by the metaphor “window”? (stanza two)

McKay is comparing a window display to fond memories of life in the tropics.

A grocery store may display colorful tropical fruits in a window to entice customers, as well as encourage the fruits to ripen in the sun.

The poet’s words frame his clear memories just a like sturdy casing frames a clear window.

- What ideas are being compared by the metaphor “hunger”? (stanza three)

McKay is comparing a desire for food with a desire for a way of life.

The poet may be hungry for sweet, aromatic tropical fruits and spices, while the poem explicitly, powerfully states the author’s hunger for the “old, familiar ways” of life in the tropics.

- “The Tropics in New York” is a narrative poem, meaning it tells a short story. What are the key events in the narrative—what happens in the poem?

The poet sees a display of tropical fruits in the window of a grocery store. The fruits remind him of his life in the tropics, a time he remembers with happiness. Overcome with emotions and memories, the poet turns away from the window and cries.

- Based on the poem, where do you think the poet is from?

Claude McKay grew up in Jamaica, where fruits such as bananas, mangoes, and “alligator pears” (avocados) are often found at “parish fairs” (similar to farmers’ markets). He moved to New York City as a young man.

**Fast Facts**

Claude McKay wrote powerfully about life in both Jamaica and the United States. He also wrote about the racism and prejudice he had to deal with. His most famous poem is probably “America,” which starts with these lines:

“Although she feeds me the bread of bitterness,
And sinks into my throat her tiger’s tooth,
Stealing my breath of life, I will confess
I love this cultured hell that tests my youth.”
Claude McKay became one of the most famous and influential members of the Harlem Renaissance. He traveled throughout Europe, and even lived in London, England, for several years.

Claude McKay moved to New York City, New York, where he quickly became one of the most important poets of the Harlem Renaissance. Sometimes called the “New Negro Movement,” the Harlem Renaissance was a movement focusing on African-American art and culture. Other artists associated with the Harlem Renaissance include the poet Langston Hughes, the dancer Josephine Baker, the novelist Zora Neale Hurston, the actor Paul Robeson, the musician Duke Ellington, and the painter Jacob Lawrence.

Claude McKay moved to the United States to attend college. He went to the Tuskegee Institute in Tuskegee, Alabama, and Kansas State University in Manhattan, Kansas, but did not graduate.

Claude McKay was born in Jamaica in 1889. Today, he is the national poet of the island nation.

### Vocabulary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Part of Speech</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>alligator</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>nickname for an avocado. Also called an &quot;alligator fruit.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pear</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>form of blessing or good wishes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>climate</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>all weather conditions for a given location over a period of time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dawn</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>first appearance of daylight in the morning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>endemic</td>
<td>adjective</td>
<td>native to a specific geographic space.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>food</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>material, usually of plant or animal origin, that living organisms use to obtain nutrients.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gaze</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>steady look or line of sight.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>isolation</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>state of being alone or separated from a community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>laden</td>
<td>adjective</td>
<td>full or heavy with.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>literary</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>technique or method a writer uses to structure their work or produce an effect, such as metaphor or hyperbole.</td>
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<tr>
<td>device</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>strong, emotional desire.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>metaphor</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>word or phrase used to represent something else.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mystical</td>
<td>adjective</td>
<td>spiritually symbolic.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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narrative
noun
story or telling of events.
nostalgia
noun
sentimental or bittersweet desire for elements (feelings, people, materials) important in the past.
nun
noun
woman who has taken vows dedicating her life to spiritual practice, usually referring to nuns of the Catholic faith.
parish
noun
political division, similar to a county.
pod
noun
thick casing of some seeds, such as legumes or cocoa.
rill
noun
very small stream.
tropics
plural noun
region generally located between the Tropic of Cancer (23 1/2 degrees north of the Equator) and the Tropic of Capricorn (23 1/2 degrees south of the Equator).
weep
verb
to cry.

Articles & Profiles
• Modern American Poetry: On “The Tropics in New York”

Instructional Content
• Study.com: Claude McKay: Role in Harlem Renaissance & 'America' Analysis

Video
• Poetry Foundation: The Tropics in New York