



GCSE

English Literature

'I Shall Return' (Claude McKay)

The poet – context (AO3)

Claude McKay (1889–1948) was born in rural Jamaica. He published his first collection of poetry, *Songs of Jamaica* in 1912 and was awarded a grant enabling him to travel to America. He moved to the district of Harlem in New York City, where he contributed to what became known as the Harlem Renaissance, becoming increasingly involved in campaigning for social justice and racial equality. He travelled extensively in Europe and North Africa and published several novels, including the highly successful *Home to Harlem*.

The poem – context (AO3)

Given the fact that McKay had migrated from rural Jamaica to the USA, *I Shall Return* is at least semi-autobiographical in its depiction of a speaker who longs to return to the natural beauty of their homeland. However, although McKay travelled extensively, he never did return to Jamaica.

I Shall Return was published in the collection *Harlem Shadows* in 1922, which is seen as a key work in the Harlem Renaissance. In the early 20th century, Harlem was a focal point for Black migrants from the South, resulting in an explosion of creativity and development in literature, music, theatre, visual arts, fashion and political thinking in the Black community, which ultimately had a huge impact on American culture.

The poem – content (AO1)

In *I Shall Return*, the speaker vows to return to their homeland, anticipating the joy they would feel at seeing the natural beauty of this place once again, and suggesting they have dreamed about it many times since leaving. They also imagine hearing the music and seeing the dancing and interaction of people in the community to which they once belonged. The poem ends by describing how these sights and sounds of home would bring them comfort after many years of painful separation.

Form and structure (AO2)

I Shall Return is a Shakespearean sonnet, which is appropriate as it is about the speaker's love for their homeland and desire to see it once more. Their longing for home is highlighted by the repetition of the title phrase throughout the poem. The first two quatrains describe the natural beauty of the place, while the third focuses on its people and culture. The closing couplet emphasises the 'pain' the speaker has felt since leaving home, and how a connection to their place of origin can 'ease' this pain.

Connections and contrast

This list is not exhaustive and other comparisons are valid.

'I Shall Return' could be compared and/or contrasted with these poems from the Anthology:

I Wandered Lonely as A Cloud by William Wordsworth

Both poems explore themes of nature, memories and place.

Drummer Hodge by Thomas Hardy

Both poems explore themes of nature, place and identity.

Blackberry-Picking by Seamus Heaney

Both poems explore themes of nature, place and memories.

Sonnet 29 by Elizabeth Barrett Browning

Both poems explore themes of nature and love.



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Key questions to ask about the poem

1. What is the effect of the repetition of 'I shall return' throughout the poem? (AO2)
2. What impression of the speaker's homeland is created in the second line? (AO1)
3. As well as describing the vivid colours of the speaker's homeland, what other connotations do the words 'golden' and 'sapphire' have? (AO2)
4. What is the effect of the personification in 'the streams / That bathe the brown blades of the bending grasses'? (AO2)
5. What impression does the phrase 'my thousand dreams' suggest about the speaker's life since leaving home? (AO1)
6. In the first two quatrains of the sonnet, the speaker concentrates on describing the natural beauty of their homeland. What do they describe in the third quatrain? (AO1)
7. What is the effect of the metaphor 'delicious tunes'? (AO2)
8. What does the adjective 'dim' suggest about the speaker's memories of home? (AO2)
9. What is the impact of the final line of the poem? (AO1)
10. What form is used by McKay for the poem? Why might this be appropriate? (AO2/AO3)
11. How might the subject matter of the poem link to McKay's life? (AO3)
12. *I Shall Return* was published in *Harlem Shadows*, a key text in the Harlem Renaissance. How might the content of the poem link to this artistic and cultural movement? (AO3)

Language and imagery (AO2)

The title phrase is repeated throughout the poem, giving a sense of the speaker's determination to see their homeland again. The repetition of the adjective 'long' in the final line emphasises the length of the painful time spent abroad. The beauty of their homeland's sights and sounds is shown by metaphors such as 'sapphire skies' and 'delicious tunes'.

Example of analysing a quotation

The adjectives 'golden' and 'sapphire' convey the bright colours and beauty of the speaker's homeland; both words also have connotations of preciousness, suggesting how much these memories of home mean to the speaker.

Key quotations (AO1)

1. 'I shall return again'
2. 'I shall return / To laugh and love and watch with wonder-eyes'
3. 'golden noon'
4. 'sapphire skies'
5. 'the streams / That bathe the brown blades of the bending grasses'
6. 'And realise once more my thousand dreams'
7. 'dear delicious tunes / That stir the hidden depths of native life'
8. 'stray melodies of dim remembered runes'
9. 'To ease my mind of long, long years of pain'

Links for further research



[Poetry Foundation biography of McKay and links to poems](#)

[Video on the Harlem Renaissance](#)

[Web page on the Harlem Renaissance](#)

[Harlem Shadows by Claude McKay read by Denise Ray](#)