If We Must Die by Claude McKay

Grades 6 to 12 | Interdisciplinary RST

Complete poem If We Must Die

First Name

Last Name

Claude McKay First published in 1919

If we must die, let it not be like hogs

Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,

While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,

Making their mock at our accursèd lot.

If we must die, O let us nobly die,

So that our precious blood may not be shed

In vain; then even the monsters we defy

Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!

O kinsmen! we must meet the common foe!

Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,

And for their thousand blows deal one death blow!

What though before us lies the open grave?

Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,

Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!

Source edition Claude McKay, Harlem Shadows, Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1922, page 53. The poem first appeared in The Liberator in July 1919. Public domain in the United States. Original poetic wording and punctuation are retained. Count the fourteen poetic lines when citing evidence.

Essential question

How does McKay use the sonnet's images, voice, and structure to insist on human dignity under violent oppression?

First reading Record a phrase that seems central to the speaker's purpose and explain your choice.

ELA From hunted victims to a collective voice

Reading A The argument of the poem

The opening condition presents a threatened group facing possible death. The speaker does not celebrate dying. Instead, the speaker rejects a humiliating death imposed by persecutors. The first comparison imagines people as animals trapped for slaughter. Confinement and mocking surround them with danger and deny their dignity.

The repeated condition in line 5 changes the emphasis from how the group must not die to how it should meet the danger. Words about nobility, preciousness, and honor insist that the threatened people have value. The speaker imagines even their enemies being compelled to recognize that worth. This is a rhetorical claim, not a promise that violence reliably produces respect.

Animal imagery also describes the attackers. They appear as hungry dogs and a cowardly pack, while the threatened group claims human courage. The contrast reverses the moral hierarchy imposed by racist dehumanization. It is not a biological claim about any human group.

The plural voice matters. Repeated references to “we” and “us” construct solidarity. The direct address to kinsmen turns the argument into a collective summons. Kinship here can suggest shared struggle rather than only biological family. The final two lines sharpen the refusal to submit, even while the group remains endangered.

Vocabulary

INGLORIOUS bringing shame or lacking honor

ACCURSÈD condemned or under a curse

IN VAIN without achieving a purpose

DEFY resist openly

CONSTRAINED compelled

KINSMEN members of a related or allied group

DEHUMANIZATION treating people as less than fully human

Explain how the animal imagery changes the reader’s judgment of the threatened group and the attackers.