

Name: _____ Class: _____

If We Must Die

By Claude McKay
1919

Claude McKay (1889-1948) was a Jamaican-American writer and poet who was a seminal figure during the Harlem Renaissance. McKay dedicated his life to fighting for the rights of oppressed people through his writing, and "If We Must Die" reflects McKay's perspective on the black experience in America during the early 20th century. As you read, pay attention to how McKay's use of aural and figurative language conveys his themes.

- [1] If we must die, let it not be like hogs
Hunted and penned in an inglorious¹ spot,
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
Making their mock at our accursèd lot.
- [5] 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 constrained² to honor us though dead!
O kinsmen!³ we must meet the common foe!
- [10] 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!



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1. **Inglorious (adjective):** causing shame, loss of honor
2. **Constrain (verb):** to compel or force someone to do something
3. refers to men who or of blood relation to the speaker or a part of the group of people fighting

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. What is this poem mostly about?
 - A. how war is sometimes unavoidable
 - B. how men should fight back courageously to die honorably
 - C. how difficult it is to fight when you are outnumbered by the enemy
 - D. how a group of noble men can always defeat a vicious enemy

2. What is the purpose of the first 4 lines?
 - A. to use a comparison to show how they will not die without a fight
 - B. to paint a picture of a noble death
 - C. to suggest that hogs are indecent and weak creatures
 - D. to accuse the enemy of acting like common house pets

3. What is the purpose of the alliteration in line 4?
 - A. It repeats a letter sound to imitate the sound of giggling.
 - B. It draws readers in to create a smooth flow.
 - C. It repeats a letter sound to highlight the insults being made.
 - D. It draws readers' attention to the playful mood of the poem.

4. What is the meaning of lines 7-8?
 - A. that the enemy are a bunch of emotionless monsters
 - B. that dying honorably forces even the enemy to pay their respects
 - C. that they are ready to fight back against the enemy despite the dire circumstances
 - D. that they are united as one front against an un-unified enemy

5. PART A: In line 8, "constrained" means about the same as...
 - A. revived
 - B. forced
 - C. invited
 - D. proud

6. PART B: Which phrase from the poem provides the best clue to the meaning of "constrained"?
 - A. "If we must die, O let us nobly die" (Line 1)
 - B. "Making their mock at our accursed lot" (Line 4)
 - C. "In vain; then even the monsters we defy" (Line 6)
 - D. "We must meet the common foe!" (Line 9)

7. PART A: In lines 13-14, the diction portrays the enemy as which of the following?
- A. brave
 - B. honorable
 - C. trapped
 - D. weak
8. PART B: Which of the following words helped you choose the answer to Part A?
- A. "murderous"
 - B. "cowardly"
 - C. "pressed"
 - D. "fighting"
9. PART A: The tone of this poem can be described as:
- A. hopeful
 - B. cautious
 - C. inspirational
 - D. critical
10. PART B: Which two phrases helped you answer Part A?
- A. "be like hogs"
 - B. "hunted and penned"
 - C. "let us nobly die"
 - D. "O kinsmen!"
 - E. "let us show us brave"
 - F. "lies the open grave"

Discussion Questions

Directions: *Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.*

1. According to the speaker, how should a person face death? Explain your answer in detail.
2. Based on your own experience, how do people face death? Cite evidence from your own life, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.
3. Consider the time period during which McKay wrote "If We Must Die." How might the social conditions of the era and McKay's experience as a black writer in Harlem have informed his views on death and bravery?
4. In the context of this poem, what does it mean to be brave? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.