

Name: _____

Class: _____

If We Must Die

By Claude McKay
1919

Claude McKay (1889-1948) was a Jamaican American writer, poet, and an influential figure during the Harlem Renaissance. McKay dedicated his life to fighting for the rights of oppressed people. McKay wrote "If We Must Die" as a response to the mob violence against African Americans during Red Summer. Between April and November of 1919, there was a wave of white supremacist terrorism attacks. Hundreds were killed and thousands more were injured. As you read, take notes on McKay's use of figurative language in the poem.

[1] 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.

[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 constrained to honor us though dead!
O kinsmen!¹ 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. refers to people who are of blood relation to the speaker or are a part of the group of people fighting