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

Text-Dependent Questions

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

1. Which statement best describes the main theme of the poem?
    A. Dignity is worth fighting for, even at the assurance of death.
    B. It is dishonorable to lose a fight, even if one is outnumbered.
    C. Do what is necessary to survive, even if it means acting out of fear.
    D. People who die in battle, even for a noble cause, are often forgotten.

2. 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.

3. 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

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

5. PART B: Which phrase from the poem provides the best clue to the meaning of "constrained"?
    A. "If we must die, let it not be like hogs" (Line 1)
    B. "Making their mock at our accursed lot" (Line 4)
    C. "In vain; then even the monsters we defy" (Line 7)
    D. "We must meet the common foe!" (Line 9)

6. PART A: In lines 13-14, the diction portrays the enemy as which of the following?
    A. brave
    B. honorable
    C. trapped
    D. weak

7. PART B: Which of the following words from lines 13-14 helped you answer Part A?
   A. “murderous”
   B. “cowardly”
   C. “pressed”
   D. “fighting”

8. PART A: The tone of this poem can be described as —
   A. hopeful.
   B. cautious.
   C. inspirational.
   D. critical.

9. PART B: Which TWO details from the poem best support the answer to Part A?
   A. “be like hogs” (Line 1)
   B. “Hunted and penned” (Line 2)
   C. “let us nobly die” (Line 5)
   D. “O kinsmen!” (Line 9)
   E. “let us show us brave” (Line 10)
   F. “lies the open grave” (Line 12)

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.