If We Must Die

POEM TEXT

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!

SUMMARY

If we have to die, let's not die like pigs, hunted and trapped in some dishonorable place, while all around us hungry hunting dogs bark like crazy, mocking us for our terrible fate. If we have to die, let's die with honor, so that we don't sacrifice our valuable blood for nothing. Then even the bad people we rebel against will have to honor us, even though we're dead. Oh fellow sufferers, we have to fight our mutual enemy. Even though we are seriously outnumbered, let's show them how brave we are. And for all the blows they give us, let's return one killing hit. Who cares if our open graves are right in front of us? We'll fight these murderous cowards like men, our backs against the wall, fighting back even as we die!

THEMES

VIOLENCE, DIGNITY, AND RESISTANCE

"If We Must Die" is a poem about confronting oppression. The speaker addresses a group of oppressed people—a group that the speaker identifies with and seems to be part of. These people have been stripped of their dignity and freedom and are in despair, cornered by violent oppressors. Faced with this desperate situation, the speaker proposes a radical solution for their suffering. The poem argues that violent, even suicidal, acts of resistance are the only viable option for this oppressed group—the only way they can reclaim their dignity and freedom.

The people that the speaker of "If We Must Die" addresses are oppressed, so much so that they are in danger of losing not only their lives but also their humanity. The speaker describes these people as surrounded by "monsters" and "mad and hungry dogs" who will inflict a "thousand blows" upon them. They are "far outnumbered" by these monsters. These metaphors indicate that the group of people the poem addresses is a minority community threatened by violence from a larger and more powerful group.

The oppression that the group suffers threatens to turn them into animals, figuratively speaking—to deprive them of their humanity. As the speaker notes in line 1, they are in danger of dying "like hogs." But the speaker's metaphors imply that the people who oppress them have *also* lost their humanity. The speaker consistently describes these oppressors as horrifying, inhuman creatures; again, they are "mad and hungry dogs" and "monsters." The poem thus hints that oppression diminishes the humanity of *everyone* involved, both oppressor and oppressed.

The speaker goes on to propose a way for the oppressed group to regain its humanity: violent resistance. The speaker proposes to match violence with violence, saying that the group being addressed should exchange "their [the oppressor's] thousand blows" for "one death blow." Though the speaker acknowledges that this group must die, they can nonetheless die "fighting back."

Essentially, "If We Must Die" offers two options to the oppressed people it addresses: they can either die "like hogs" or "like men." Notably, the speaker and the group of oppressed people don't have any choice about whether they live or die. Their situation is so desperate that they can only decide *how* they die. But, the speaker points out, not all deaths are equal. To die "like hogs" will only underline the oppression they already suffer. To die "like men," however, will allow them to attain some measure of freedom and dignity and to retain—in death if not in life—the humanity they are in danger of losing. As a result of their bravery, the "monsters" who oppress them will be forced to recognize their humanity, to "honor [them] though dead."

The poem thus proposes violent resistance as the only way to reclaim humanity and dignity in a desperate situation. However, it also indicates that some form of oppression may always persist, when the speaker says: "even the monsters we defy / Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!" The oppressed people's bravery, it seems, forces the oppressors to recognize their humanity. That is, humanity only comes when the oppressors finally grant it—even if the oppressed take the action the speaker recommends. In this way, the poem underscores the persistence of precisely the problem the speaker is trying to overcome: the oppressors have the power to deprive other people of their humanity, and taking that power away from them may be a nearly impossible task.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

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.

The first 4 lines of "If We Must Die" establish the poem's theme and introduce its form.

As the poem opens, the speaker outlines a desperate situation. Using apostrophe, the speaker addresses a group of oppressed people who seem to be living under the threat of certain death. (And the speaker is part of this group: he or she addresses them as "we" in the first line.) Given the death they face, the speaker argues that the group must not die "like hogs." This simile shows the speaker's fear that the group will be slaughtered like domesticated animals—"hunted" as though they had been raised simply to be killed. In other words, the speaker is afraid that their deaths will strip them of their dignity and independence—and, more importantly, of their humanity.

However, a parallel figure of speech suggests that the oppressors' violence will also strip the oppressors themselves of their own humanity. Using a metaphor, the speaker describes the oppressors as "mad and hungry dogs." Both metaphor and simile personify the animals in question. The dogs, for instance, "mock" the "accursed lot" of the hogs. The combination of metaphor and personification lets the speaker vividly show how the oppressors have no pity for the people they slaughter; indeed, chillingly, they find their suffering humorous. No one, it seems, is particularly human within such a destructive society.

Even from just these first lines, it's already clear that "If We Must Die" describes a dark and desperate situation. However, they also establish the ways in which the poem itself is elegant and polished. Throughout, the speaker uses refined diction such as "accurséd"—some of it already old-fashioned by the time McKay wrote the poem in 1919. The form of the poem is also both elegant and old-fashioned, a Shakespearean sonnet. This form dates to the middle ages and it became popular in English in the 16th century. The form was used by some of McKay's literary heroes, including poets like John Milton. By writing a Shakespearean sonnet, McKay proves that a contemporary Black writer can match the prominent dead white men of English poetry, on their own turf, using their forms.

The speaker shows off their own literary skill, using alliteration in marked fashion, as in the /h/ sound in "hogs," "hunted," and "hungry." In using alliteration, however, the speaker is not *just* showing off: the alliteration also underlines the connection between the dogs' hunger and their hunting, which in turn reduces the people the poem addresses to the status of "hogs."

The poem also follows the rhyme scheme and meter of a Shakespearean sonnet. Its first 4 lines are rhymed *ABAB* and are in iambic pentameter, with the occasional metrical substitution (like the trochee in the first foot of line 2, "Hunted"). These lines are enjambed in an irregular fashion: the first line is enjambed and the next 3 are end-stopped, with a caesura midway through the first line. The pause the caesura creates separates out the poem's opening phrase—"If we must die"—as particularly important and so prepares the reader for the return of that same phrase in line 5.

LINES 5-8

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!

Lines 1-4 outline a dark possibility: the oppressed people the speaker addresses might die "like hogs." But in lines 5-8, the speaker encourages them to find an alternative: perhaps they "must die," but maybe they can at least die "nobly."

The speaker promises that a noble death will change the dynamics of the situation in an important way: the oppressed people will not die "in vain," because the "monsters" who murder them will be forced to "honor" them in death. In other words, the oppressors will respect them for their noble deaths—even though they will still murder them. This is a potentially troubling argument. If "honor" can only come from the oppressors, then the oppressors still get to decide the value of the lives they take. And that's the problem the poem is trying to overcome: the oppressors already have the power to diminish the humanity of the people they oppress. In these lines, then, the speaker hints at exactly how difficult it is to wrest power away from oppressive groups, even through the bravest resistance.

These lines continue the formal pattern established in the first four lines, following the rules for a Shakespearean sonnet. They are rhymed *CDCD* and written in iambic pentameter with the occasional pointed substitution—like the dactyl midway through line 7: "**then** even." By putting the stress on the word "then," the speaker emphasizes the transformation that will occur if the oppressed die "nobly" and not "like hogs." The poem's irregular use of enjambment also continues, with enjambments in lines 6 and 7. These enjambments help the poem retain some flexibility and dynamism within its mostly rigid structure.

However, the poem's highly structured character is on particular display in two respects in these lines. First, it is evident in the repetition of the poem's opening phrase, "If we must die." Repeating the phrase, the speaker uses anaphora, drawing attention to the continuity between the first 4 lines and lines 5-8—both sets of lines outline the desperation of a situation in which oppressed people have no choice but to die. Second, each of these two quatrains is a single sentence, which begins in line 1 or line 5 and continues to the end of line 4 or line 8. There is no enjambment across these quatrains, showing how the speaker has calibrated the length of each sentence to fit smoothly with the poem's rhyme scheme. These formal features are further demonstrations of the speaker's control and proficiency in a difficult form.

LINES 9-12

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?

In lines 5-8, the speaker proposed that the group of oppressed people they address should "nobly die"—instead of dying "like hogs." In lines 9-12, the speaker explains more precisely *how* they can make their deaths noble.

Though they are seriously outnumbered, the speaker proposes that the oppressed group should fight back and deliver "one death-blow" in exchange for the many attacks they receive from their oppressors. Put simply, the speaker outlines a plan to resist violence with violence. The speaker, it seems, does not accept the arguments of pacifist intellectuals and activists like Henry David Thoreau and Mahatma Gandhi: that oppressed communities should use non-violent strategies of resistance. Instead, the speaker endorses violence—even if it costs all of their lives. Indeed, the speaker does not admit any alternative and dismisses the costs of such a strategy. In line 12, the speaker acknowledges that some readers may have doubts about the plan or may be unwilling to lay down their lives. But the speaker uses aporia to dismiss these doubts. That is, instead of debating or even directly acknowledging these doubts, the speaker simply waves them aside with a rhetorical question.

Throughout the poem, the speaker is vague about who the group of oppressed people is—and who their oppressors are. In these lines, it begins to seem that this might be an intentional, conscious strategy on the part of the speaker. The speaker refers to the oppressed group simply as "kinsmen" and the oppressors as "the common foe." Though the poem emerges from a specific historical context—the race riots of 1919, which occurred across the United States and are often called "the red summer"—it is careful to suppress this context. It speaks both to its own historical moment and more broadly, addressing all oppressed people, no matter who they are. By avoiding naming its context, the poem subtly proposes that *all* oppressed people have a "common foe" and that they are all "kinsmen." It thus suggests that its strategy—of confronting violence with violence—applies to all struggles for freedom.

This quatrain continues the formal pattern established in the poem's first eight lines. It is rhymed *EFEF*, in iambic pentameter (again with a few metrical substitutions, like the spondee at the end of line 11: "death-blow," which mimics the force of the blow). However, the speaker has stopped using enjambment altogether: lines 9-14 are all end-stopped. It's as if the speaker's struggle has grown too urgent to allow the long, fluid sentences that made up the first two quatrains. As a result, it seems, the speaker is pulling out all the stops to make readers pay attention to his or her argument, and that means relying on dramatic punctuation at the ends of lines.

The speaker does use internal rhyme to keep the poem from feeling too stiff in the absence of enjambment, with "show" and "blows" in line 10-11. And the speaker also uses consonance in these lines to highlight their essential meaning. For example, line 9 contains a strong /m/ sound: "O kinsmen! we must meet the common foe!" The repeated /m/ sound binds the line together and mimics the sense of commonality and mutuality that the speaker wants oppressed groups to experience.

LINES 13-14

Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!

In lines 13-14, the speaker summarizes the poem's argument and explains its ultimate consequences.

The speaker says that if the oppressed group fights back against their oppressors, they will die, but the crucial difference is that they will die "like men." This simile pairs with the speaker's simile in line 1: the options open to the oppressed group are to die "like hogs" or to die "like men." In other words, the speaker suggests that they will regain their humanity through their own violent resistance.

Importantly, however, the speaker does not suggest that the oppressors will regain *their* humanity. Indeed, the speaker reuses a metaphor from earlier in the poem. In the same way that the speaker compares the oppressors to "mad and hungry dogs" in line 3, in line 13, the speaker describes them as a "murderous, cowardly pack." In other words, there has been no change in the oppressors' condition: they remain a violent, terrifying group of animals. The humanity of the oppressors is ultimately not the speaker's concern, or the poem's. The speaker is focused instead on how best to regain the humanity of the oppressed and recommends violence as their only meaningful course of action.

In its final two lines, the poem continues to follow the standard rules for a Shakespearean sonnet. Its rhyme scheme switches, as the form dictates: instead of the criss-cross pattern that characterized lines 1-12, lines 13-14 are rhymed GG. Line 13 is end-stopped, but only weakly: because line 14 is not grammatically complete on its own, it feels more like an enjambment. And there are two caesuras in line 14, which bracket the word "dying." Though the speaker has been relatively frank about the stakes of the plan he or she recommends elsewhere in the poem, here the speaker seems to shy away from the consequences of the violence he or she encourages, seeming to create some distance from the act of dying by isolating it between two commas.

The final two lines of a Shakespearean sonnet often contain what's known as a *volta* or a *turn*: an opportunity for the speaker to reflect on the poem, perhaps change their mind, and offer a fresh perspective on the issues the poem has raised. The speaker, however, does not take this opportunity in "If We Must Die." Though there are subtle shifts in the poem's rhetoric throughout, the poem is one continuous thought, without any significant doubt or reconsideration. The speaker is completely firm in his or her passionate argument for violent resistance to oppression, and the choice to forgo a true *volta* in these final lines underscores that confidence.

SYMBOLS

HOGS

Literally speaking, hogs are farmyard animals, slaughtered for pork and bacon. But as the word "like" indicates, these are not literal hogs: instead, the speaker is using a simile to show how the oppressed people the poem addresses are in danger of becoming "like hogs." The hogs thus serve as a symbol for the conditions they find themselves in: they are treated like animals, not human beings. They are raised for slaughter, and they are kept under tight control in pens or corrals. They do not have freedom of movement.

This symbol suggests that the oppressed people the poem addresses (and more broadly, oppressed people everywhere) lack some of the basic freedoms necessary to live a life that's truly human. Further, it suggests that their oppressors have systematically worked to deny them those rights, creating something like a farm: an organized system that limits people's freedom and deprives them of their fundamental rights as humans.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "hogs"

DOGS

While the oppressed people the poem addresses are like "hogs," then the people who harass them are "dogs."

Here, the speaker uses the dogs as a symbol for mob violence: these metaphorical dogs come in "packs"; they are "mad and hungry"; they both mock and attack. There is some ambiguity in the symbol, since dogs are used as both herding and hunting animals; it is somewhat unclear whether the dogs are attempting to hunt or to control the "hogs," though the word "murderous" in line 13 suggests that the "dogs" do want to kill the "hogs."

In any case, the distinction makes little difference to the speaker, who seems to argue that it feels as terrifying and as degrading to be herded as to be hunted. And both practices end in the same result: the hogs are slaughtered. However, dogs don't run farms; they are working animals, under the control of farmers. The symbol thus subtly implies that the mobs are not free either. Instead, perhaps without realizing it, they are also doing the bidding of someone else or some other power (likely a societal one) that the poem does not name.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "dogs"
- **Line 13:** "murderous, cowardly pack"

MONSTERS

Until line 7, the speaker uses symbols drawn from farming and hunting, with "dogs" and "hogs" dramatizing the dynamics of oppression.

In line 7, however, the speaker switches the source of symbols and describes the oppressors simply as "monsters." This is a broad, even generic symbol: the reader does not learn what kind of monsters they are or what exactly is dangerous or frightening about them. The symbol is thus used simply to indicate that the people who are oppressing the people the speaker addresses are themselves inhuman. Their status as monsters symbolizes the way that the violence and virulence of their oppression has degraded them into something namelessly awful that isn't even human anymore.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "monsters"

OPEN GRAVE

In line 12, the speaker admits the full cost of violent resistance: an "open grave." In other words, all of these people will almost certainly die in the struggle—there is little possibility of escape or a liberated life.

The "open grave" is thus symbolic: it represents death itself. The fact that the speaker uses a symbol (rather than referring to death directly) is potentially revealing. It suggests that the speaker is not entirely comfortable with the consequences of their ideas, despite how confident their words have been throughout the poem. The fact that the speaker feels the need to disguise those consequences, however slightly, with a symbol indicates that maybe the speaker does feel a bit of uncertainty after all.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 12:** "open grave"

POETIC DEVICES

END-STOPPED LINE

Like other Shakespearean sonnets, "If We Must Die" can be split into four units: three quatrains, each rhymed ABAB, and a final couplet rhymed GG. The speaker is careful to keep each of these units separate from each other grammatically. That is, each of these units ends with the end of a sentence: in the first two quatrains, the whole quatrain is a sentence, which comes to a close at the end of line 4 or line 8. In other words, there is no enjambment that crosses the boundaries of these units: each unit is end-stopped. This firm structure and consistent end-stop gives the reader the sense that the poem is carefully organized, reinforcing the feeling that the speaker is a master of the form.

Within these units, however, the use of end-stop is less regular. In the first quatrain, lines 2-4 are all end-stopped. In the next, line 5 and line 8 are end-stopped, while the rest of the lines are enjambed. The rest of the poem is end-stopped. (Though some of these end-stops are stronger than others: line 14 is grammatically incomplete without line 13, so while line 13 is technically end-stopped, it may feel more like an enjambment because line 14 doesn't make grammatical sense without it.) The speaker's thoughts intensify as the poem progresses, becoming shorter, more definite, and more forceful as the end-stopping gets more dense. In the first eight lines, the irregular enjambments keep the poem from feeling too constrained by its form. In contrast, in the final six lines the heavy, regular end-stops give a sense of constraint: there is no flexibility and no alternative to the violent resistance the speaker describes.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "spot,"
- **Line 3:** "dogs,"
- **Line 4:** "lot."
- **Line 5:** "die,"
- **Line 8:** "dead!"
- **Line 9:** "foe!"
- **Line 10:** "brave,"
- **Line 11:** "death-blow!"
- **Line 12:** "grave?"
- **Line 13:** "pack,"
- **Line 14:** "back!"

ENJAMBMENT

"If We Must Die" only uses enjambment in its first eight lines, in an irregular pattern: lines 1, 6, and 7 are enjambed. After line 7, the poem does not use enjambment again. (Though line 13 may also feel enjambed—line 14 is grammatically incomplete without it. So even though line 13 is a complete grammatical unit in itself, the reader's experience spills over the end of the line and travels into the next line).

This limited, particular use of enjambment enhances the reader's experience of the poem's meaning. For instance, the poem never enjambs across its internal units. The poem can be divided into three quatrains and a final couplet. The speaker is careful to respect the boundaries of these units, treating each as its own conceptual and grammatical space. In contrast, where enjambments appear, they create a sense of openness and possibility. That sense of openness disappears completely in the poem's final six lines, as the speaker's thoughts become shorter and more definite. In the absence of enjambment, the reader feels the desperation of the situation more acutely: the long string of end-stops starting in line 9 model the constraint under which the oppressed people operate. And they also subtly reinforce the lack of alternatives to the speaker's radical and violent proposal. In this sense, the poem's use of enjambment and end-stop mirrors the complex political circumstances that the poem discusses.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "hogs / Hunted"
- **Lines 6-7:** "shed / In"
- **Lines 7-8:** "defy / Shall"

CAESURA

Caesura appears throughout "If We Must Die," though not in a regular pattern. Sometimes caesura appears in coordination with other devices. For example, the caesuras in the middles of lines 1 and 5 are a consequence of anaphora, the repetition of the phrase "If we must die." The next caesura, in line 7, appears as a consequence of enjambment: the sentence that starts in line 6 doesn't end until midway through line 8, after "In vain". Accordingly, the sentence breaks partway through line 7, producing a caesura.

In the poem's final 6 lines, there are four caesuras. In line 9, there is a weak caesura as the speaker calls out to their "kinsmen." The caesura is weak because it does not significantly affect the line: one could read it without the caesura and the literal meaning would be the same, although the exclamation point does highlight the speaker's passion and desperation. Similarly, the caesura in line 13 simply separates two items in a list; it does not affect the meaning of the line.

The final two caesuras appear in line 14 and bracket the word "dying" from the rest of the line. These are perhaps the most thematically significant caesuras in the poem. Here, the speaker seems to admit only grudgingly that their plan requires oppressed people to sacrifice their lives; the caesuras betray the speaker's desire to suppress this fact, to separate it a bit from the glory of "fighting back." However, the caesuras stick out enough that they actually undermine this attempt to disguise the risk of death. Instead, they call attention both to the word "dying" and to the possibility that the speaker may not be speaking entirely in good faith—they seem somewhat unwilling to fully accept the consequences of the violence described.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** ", "
- **Line 5:** ", "
- **Line 7:** "; "
- **Line 9:** "! "
- **Line 13:** ", "
- **Line 14:** ", ," ", "

ALLITERATION

"If We Must Die" seems eager to show off its literary accomplishment. Its speaker uses a prestigious form—the Shakespearean sonnet—and writes with elevated diction. Similarly, the speaker makes heavy use of alliteration, a device that often conveys self-conscious literary ambition. But the speaker does not use alliteration willy-nilly. Instead, the patterns of alliteration reinforce the poem's underlying argument about oppression, violence, and resistance.

For example, the first quatrain contains strong alliteration on an /h/ sound, in "hogs," "hunted," and "hungry." The alliteration binds the three words—and the three ideas they represent—together: the hunger of the dogs is the reason why the hogs are hunted. Indeed, it is also why these oppressed people are in danger of becoming "like hogs." The alliteration underlines the way that oppression strips away the humanity of the oppressed.

Similarly, lines 10-11 contain an alliterative /b/ sound in "brave," "blow," and "blow." The alliteration connects the bravery of the oppressed people with the blows they both endure and inflict upon their oppressors. It suggests that they are brave both to endure those blows and to return them; that is, it takes bravery to fight back. In this way, alliteration once again reinforces the poem's underlying argument, making connections in sound that the speaker also makes through the lines' literal meaning.

There are many other instances of alliteration, which generally serve the same purpose as these examples. For example, the /m/ of "must meet" (line 9) underscores the necessity of this action.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "let," "like"
- **Lines 1-2:** "hogs / Hunted"
- **Line 3:** "mad," "hungry"
- **Line 4:** "Making," "mock"
- **Line 9:** "kinsmen," "must," "meet," "common," "foe"
- **Line 10:** "far," "brave"
- **Line 11:** "blows," "deal," "death," "blow"
- **Line 13:** "men," "murderous," "pack"
- **Line 14:** "Pressed"

ASSONANCE

"If We Must Die" employs assonance throughout, sometimes subtly but often conspicuously. For example, lines 9-11 have a strong, repeated /oh/ sound:

> 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!

This play of sound binds the lines together. This is a useful strategy at this moment in the poem: in the poem's first two quatrains, the speaker's sentences are extended thoughts that take up a full four lines each. Here, the sentences get much shorter. But the assonance emphasizes that, though the length of the sentences has changed, the speaker's thought remains continuous, stretching across the boundaries of the sentence.

This device also reinforces the poem's argument: the assonance between "foe," "show," and "blow," for instance, creates a bridge between these otherwise disparate concepts. It reinforces the speaker's plan: that a "blow" will "show" the oppressed peoples' "foes" that the oppressed people's humanity has to be respected.

The speaker uses assonance in a similarly controlled, purposeful way throughout. It serves to reinforce both the argument and the structure of the poem, and it demonstrates the speaker's skill and sophistication.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "not," "hogs"
- **Line 2:** "spot"

- **Line 3:** “dogs”
- **Line 4:** “mock,” “lot”
- **Line 9:** “O,” “foe”
- **Line 10:** “Though,” “show”
- **Line 11:** “blows,” “blow”

CONSONANCE

“If We Must Die” uses prominent alliteration, assonance, and consonance throughout. For one thing, the poem’s sonic richness puts its literary accomplishment on display: the poet is skilled and successful, even when working in a difficult form like the Shakespearean sonnet. That’s especially significant for this particular poem, since part of its argument is that even people who have been attacked and dehumanized are still human—as the speaker demonstrates by producing poetry at the very highest level.

What's more, the speaker uses sound to underline the poem’s arguments. For example, line 9 contains strong alliteration and consonance on an /m/ sound: “O kinsmen! we must meet the common foe!” The repeated /m/ sound, which stretches across the line, creates a sense of sonic continuity that might be taken to symbolize the broader community of oppressed people that the line addresses.

Similarly, line 3 contains a repeated /r/ sound: "While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs." The /r/ sound mimics the dogs' harsh voices, and its movement through the line replicates the sense of being surrounded. Here and throughout, the speaker is not simply showing off. Rather, the poem’s rich use of consonance reinforces and replicates its argument.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “let,” “like,” “hogs”
- **Line 2:** “Hunted,” “penned,” “inglorious spot”
- **Line 3:** “round,” “bark,” “mad,” “hungry dogs”
- **Line 4:** “Making,” “mock,” “accursèd”
- **Line 9:** “kinsmen,” “must meet,” “common,” “foe”
- **Line 10:** “far,” “brave”
- **Line 11:** “blows,” “deal,” “death,” “blow”
- **Line 13:** “men,” “face,” “murderous,” “cowardly,” “pack”
- **Line 14:** “Pressed,” “but,” “fighting,” “back”

PERSONIFICATION

The speaker uses a series of metaphors and similes to describe the oppressors and the group of people they oppress. The oppressors are “mad and hungry dogs” and “monsters” while the people they oppress are in danger of becoming “like hogs.” These metaphors and similes show how cruel and inhuman the oppressors are, while also demonstrating how the oppressed are in danger of losing their own humanity. In other words, the speaker uses these metaphors and similes to stress how everyone involved in oppression—both the oppressors and the oppressed—ultimately loses their humanity.

However, these metaphors and similes rely on personification. The animals that the poem invokes retain some human characteristics. Indeed, they may even gain human characteristics: as the people in the poem lose their humanity, the animals they are compared to seem to absorb it in return. For example, the pack of “mad and hungry dogs” seems like a mob of angry humans; after all, real dogs don't generally "mock" anyone. Similarly the “hogs” in line 1 seem like a group of defeated people, with their will to defend themselves beaten out of them; again, it's unlikely that normal pigs would notice the difference that their circumstances are "inglorious." The use of personification in the poem thus emphasizes the extent to which all parties have lost—or are in danger of losing—their humanity; in the context of this violent oppression, even animals seem more human than humans do.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “like hogs”
- **Line 3:** “mad and hungry dogs”
- **Line 4:** “mock”
- **Line 13:** “the murderous, cowardly pack”

APORIA

In line 12, the speaker employs aporia, posing a rhetorical question: “What though before us lies the open grave?” The speaker acknowledges here that some of the people they're addressing may have doubts about the speaker's plan; they may think it better to live in oppression than to die violently. The speaker does not debate this idea. Indeed, the speaker barely even acknowledges it. Instead, the speaker dismisses it as soon as they invoke it, framing it as a frustrated rhetorical question. In other words, the speaker acknowledges these doubts simply to reject them.

By using aporia, the speaker makes it immediately clear that, in their opinion, these doubts are so unimportant that they don’t even deserve a full, thoughtful argument. Nonetheless, the use of aporia is revealing and important, since the speaker does not elsewhere acknowledge that anyone might doubt their plan—or that there was, in real life, a vigorous and ongoing debate at the time the poem was written about how oppressed communities should resist their oppressors and fight for justice. The speaker admits this debate into the poem through the use of aporia, while also making it clear that as far as they're concerned, the right answer is obvious.

Where Aporia appears in the poem:

- **Line 12:** “What though before us lies the open grave?”

APOSTROPHE

“If We Must Die” addresses an unidentified group of oppressed people. The poem’s speaker offers instruction and encouragement to those people in the form of advice about how to resist oppression with dignity. Since the poem does not specify its setting, the reader can imagine its situation in a number of different ways. Perhaps the speaker is giving a speech at a political rally, or perhaps the speaker is writing an op-ed in the newspaper. However one reads the poem, though, it is clear that the people the speaker addresses cannot respond—and in fact, they may be absent. The poem thus uses apostrophe throughout.

This use of apostrophe is key to the poem. Although this poem is generally taken to be about anti-Black racism, the speaker never actually specifies *which* group of oppressed people they're addressing. This allows the poem to speak to a broad variety of groups, facing an array of oppressions. If the people addressed were able to speak in the poem, they might dispel this sense of generality by tying the poem to a specific time, place, or cause. The use of apostrophe thus allows the speaker to maintain the poem’s capacity to be applied widely. It does, however, also reduce the agency of the people the speaker addresses, because they are not able to complain or dispute the speaker’s tactics. The poem is provocative and polemic, and one imagines that it would spark fierce debate among the people it addresses. But the use of apostrophe excludes this debate from the poem itself.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

ANAPHORA

“If We Must Die” contains anaphora in lines 1 and 5: the phrase that serves as the poem’s title repeats at the start of each of these lines. Anaphora performs several key functions in the poem. Most importantly, it emphasizes how stark and desperate the poem’s circumstances are. That is, the speaker and the group of oppressed people the speaker addresses don’t have any choice about whether to live or die. Instead, their choice is simply *how* they die.

The anaphora also underlines the formal organization of the poem. Coming as it does at the starts of lines 1 and 5, each instance of the phrase marks the beginning of a new quatrain, a new set of rhymes—and a new sentence. The anaphora thus acts as a guide to the poem’s internal structure—and in doing so, it helps the reader see how carefully constructed that structure is.

Finally, the use of anaphora makes the poem sound like a speech or a public declaration of some kind. Though the poem never specifies its setting and never tells its readers if it is, for example, a speech or an op-ed or just an angry thought, the use of anaphora makes the poem *feel* like a speech. The reader gets the sense—whether accurate or not—that its speaker is a skilled orator making a vital and passionate case.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “If we must die”
- **Line 5:** “If we must die”

SIMILE

There are two similes in “If We Must Die,” one at the start of the poem and one at the end. The similes thus frame the poem, and much of the poem’s argument can be traced through the differences between them. In line 1, the speaker worries that “we” will die “like hogs.” The oppressors, it seems, will turn the oppressed into docile farm animals, who live contained lives and are killed for their meat. The simile emphasizes the severity of the violence that they face: the oppressors threaten to strip the oppressed of life, of dignity, and finally, of their humanity.

The poem goes on to meditate on how oppressed people might reclaim their humanity in the face of such violence. Its answer is radical and challenging: it advocates violent resistance to violence. And it promises that such resistance will allow the oppressed to die “like men.” The simile suggests that, through violence, the oppressed will regain the humanity that has been stripped away from them.

In this sense, the second simile compliments the first: where the simile in line 1 describes how the oppressed might lose their humanity, the second describes how they might regain it. Note, too, that the speaker consistently uses simile to describe the status of the oppressed while using metaphor to characterize the oppressors. The speaker keeps the two groups separate—even though similar things happen to them. The oppressors also lose their humanity, becoming “dogs” and “monsters.” While both groups lose their humanity, it happens in different ways and it means different things. Importantly, the oppressed are only *like* animals, which suggests that they're still human underneath the surface. The oppressors, on the other hand, *are* animals, which suggests that their dehumanization is deeper and can never be reversed. The speaker describes these two transformations in different terms, using in different devices, in order to emphasize the key differences between the results.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “like hogs”
- **Line 13:** “Like men”

METAPHOR

The speaker uses metaphor in "If We Must Die” to characterize the oppressors who threaten the group of oppressed people the speaker addresses. In line 3, the speaker describes them as "mad and hungry dogs." This metaphor suggests that the oppressors are a mob of angry, violent people. It also suggests that they have lost their humanity, instead becoming violent, deranged animals. (And it suggests that they may not be entirely in charge—after all, dogs usually have masters, who direct and control them. The poem does not give its readers any information about those masters—nor does it confirm that they even exist.) This metaphor reappears in line 13, when the speaker describes the oppressors as a "murderous, cowardly pack"—again, a pack of humans who might as well be dogs.

However, the speaker switches metaphors in line 7, referring to the oppressors as "monsters." Once again, the metaphor suggests that the oppressors have lost their humanity: they have become horrifying and inhuman. The speaker's metaphors thus suggest that oppression strips everyone of their humanity—oppressor and oppressed alike. (The oppressors are in danger of becoming "like hogs," the speaker says in line 1).

But it's notable that the speaker uses metaphor to characterize the oppressors and simile to characterize the oppressed. They both lose their humanity, but they do so in different ways: the oppressed have it stripped away from them, while the oppressors lose it through their own violence and disregard for human dignity. What's more, the word "like" in the simile suggests that perhaps the oppressed can someday regain their humanity, while the more direct language of the metaphor (the oppressors aren't just *like* dogs; they *are* dogs) indicates that the humanity of the oppressors may be gone forever. The separate poetic devices help the reader keep these processes separate and it emphasizes that the oppressors and the oppressed are different, even though the same thing happens to them.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "mad and hungry dogs"
- **Line 7:** "monsters we defy"
- **Line 13:** "murderous, cowardly pack"

VOCABULARY

Penned (Line 2) - Trapped. The word is usually used for livestock, like cows or pigs. In coordination with the word "hogs" in the previous line, it suggests that oppressed people are not treated like human beings, but rather like animals raised for slaughter.

Inglorious (Line 2) - Disgraceful or humble.

Round (Line 3) - Around. The dogs have surrounded the "hogs" and are herding or hunting them.

Mock (Line 4) - Laugh at or make fun of. The dogs have no compassion for the animals they are herding or hunting.

Accurséd (Line 4) - Cursed.

Nobly (Line 5) - With dignity and integrity.

In vain (Line 7) - Uselessly, pointlessly.

Constrained (Line 8) - Forced to. In other words, the "monsters" will have to acknowledge the bravery and dignity of the people they destroy, because those people are so ferocious in their resistance.

Kinsmen (Line 9) - Family members. Since the poem does not specify what group of oppressed people it addresses, it potentially suggests that all oppressed people form a kind of family.

Common (Line 9) - Mutual. In this context, it means that the members of the group the speaker addresses all have the same foe.

Blows (Line 11) - Hits or strikes. The word can refer to several different kinds of hits, whether with a weapon or with bare fists.

Men (Line 13) - Human beings. The word is probably not intentionally gendered; the speaker is simply expressing a wish that, through resistance, oppressed peoples will regain their humanity. But it nonetheless carries gendered implications which may limit the poem's attempt to speak to and for all oppressed people.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"If We Must Die" is a Shakespearean sonnet. The form was popularized by Shakespeare (though he did not invent it). At the time Shakespeare wrote his sonnets, the form was primarily used for love poetry: usually a male speaker would praise a beautiful, distant, and inaccessible woman. After Shakespeare's lifetime, however, the themes of sonnets began to broaden. For example, poets like John Milton, in "On the Late Massacre in Piedmont," used it to address political and religious issues. McKay, who studied Milton carefully as a young man, follows in this tradition.

Though his poem is a Shakespearean sonnet, it is not about love. Instead, it is a poem of political resistance: a cry for oppressed people to resist their oppressors, violently if necessary.

In general, "If We Must Die" follows the formula for a Shakespearean sonnet. It is written in iambic pentameter and follows the Shakespearean rhyme scheme, ABABCDCDEFEFGG. Though McKay would later write poetry in Jamaican vernacular language, here he remains committed to European poetic traditions.

One might interpret this use of a European poetic form in several ways. As a Black man, McKay faced serious racism from white people, so by mastering a European poetic form, he may be insisting that he is just as able to write a sonnet as any white person. He may also use the form ironically: the tight formal constraints imposed by the sonnet may symbolize the political constraints that oppressed people suffer as they resist European colonialism and racism.

"If We Must Die" does lack one important thing, something sonnets usually have: a clear *volta* or *turn*. Shakespearean sonnets can be divided into two parts: the first twelve lines, which can be further broken down into three rhyming quatrains, and then a final couplet. The *volta* traditionally falls between lines 12-13. It serves as an opportunity for the poet to change his or her mind and to reflect on the argument the sonnet has made.

McKay does not take this opportunity; lines 13-14 firmly *continue* the argument established throughout the rest of the poem. In a way, this is fitting. "If We Must Die" is a poem about fighting against oppression to the death. Its speaker is not uncertain about the justice of the cause or the necessity of sacrifice, so as a result, the poem itself does not express any second thoughts.

METER

"If We Must Die" is written in iambic pentameter (five poetic feet with a da-DUM rhythm created by an unstressed-stressed syllable pattern, creating a total of ten syllables per line). This is the traditional meter for Shakespearean sonnets.

Iambic pentameter is a meter with a lot of history and prestige in English poetry. Not only did Shakespeare use it in his plays and poems, but so did major figures such as John Milton, Alexander Pope, and William Wordsworth. In using iambic pentameter, McKay takes on a challenge: to master a meter associated with the grandest traditions in English poetry. One imagines that McKay may have chosen this challenge purposefully: perhaps part of the point of the poem is that he *can* write in this meter, and he can do it as well as any white man.

And the poem's meter is strong and skillful. For instance, line 3 is in perfect iambic pentameter:

> While round | us bark | the mad | and hun- | gry dogs,

Where the poem uses metrical substitutions, they mostly feel seamless, like the trochaic substitution (stressed-unstressed) at the start of line 2 (there's arguably a pyrrhic, or a foot consisting of unstressed syllables, in the third foot here as well):

> Hunted | and penned | in an | inglor- | -ious spot,

Similar substitutions appear in lines 5 and 14. Some of the lines are less clear, however, like line 7:

> In vain; | then ev- | en the mon- | sters we | defy

Though it's unusual to find an anapest in the middle of a line (here it's in the third foot), it does not seriously disturb the line's rhythm. What's more, it highlights the stress on the first syllable of "even," emphasizing just how much force it takes to defy these "monsters."

Similarly, there is a spondee at the end of line 11:

> And for | their thou- | sand blows | deal one |
> death-blow!

Though the spondee adds an extra stress to the line, it does so for good reason: the heavy foot imitates the force of the "death-blow."

The poem thus masterfully employs its meter—and breaks from it when necessary to highlight an idea. This is all the more impressive given that, by the time McKay wrote "If We Must Die," English had become a much less flexible language than when Shakespeare and Milton wrote; McKay had a harder challenge than they did to fit the language into meter.

RHYME SCHEME

"If We Must Die" follows the standard rhyme scheme of a Shakespearean sonnet:

> ABABCDCDEFEFGG

It can be separated into three rhyming quatrains, which all rhyme in a criss-cross pattern, and a final rhymed couplet. The poem's rhymes are well-organized and strong. The poem almost exclusively rhymes single-syllable words that rhyme easily and forcefully. Further, it organizes its sentences to reinforce the rhyme. For instance, lines 1-4 are a single sentence, which ends with the rhyme at the end of line 4. The same is true of lines 5-8. Lines 9-12 contain several sentences, but they do not spill over grammatically into lines 13-14. Though the poem uses enjambment, it never enjambs across the border between quatrains. Thus, each unit of the rhyme scheme remains separate grammatically from the rest of the poem.

As a result, the poem feels strongly organized. This careful organization tells us something important about the poem's speaker. The speaker may be making a desperate argument, but their poem is under control. That is, this speaker is not calling for resistance casually or carelessly, but with deliberation and consideration. Underlying this careful control are a number of internal rhymes, for instance between "show" in line 10 and "blows" in line 11. These internal rhymes create a sense of energy and velocity that pulses under the poem's careful organization and reinforce the passion of the speaker's argument.

SPEAKER

The speaker of “If We Must Die” is an anonymous person. The reader learns little about the speaker’s personal circumstances, including their race, class, or gender. However, the speaker stresses throughout the poem that they are part of an oppressed group or community whose circumstances are so desperate that its only remaining option is to fight to the death.

The speaker addresses this community directly, using the word “we” throughout the poem. This emphasizes that the speaker is *part* of the community—not an outside observer. Rather, the speaker has suffered with the community and so understands its desperation. It's even possible that the poem could be in the voice of more than one person, since it never uses the singular pronouns "I" or "me," but rather sticks with the plural "we" and "us" throughout.

Because of the poem’s passionate denunciation of oppression, and because it calls in such strong terms for resistance to that oppression, the poem has been taken up as a rallying cry in struggles around the world—for civil rights, human rights, and freedom from colonial rule. It is most often read as a reflection specifically on anti-Black racism, because McKay himself was Black and because he so often wrestles with racism in his work.

However, the speaker carefully refrains from tying the poem to racism specifically, so while the poem is almost certainly a cry of agony and protest against racism, it is not *limited* to that interpretation. In producing a poem that can be used in many different struggles for freedom, the speaker suggests that these struggles are linked together by common dynamics and common enemies—it's as if the enemy is actually oppression itself, rather than any specific group of oppressors.

SETTING

“If We Must Die” doesn’t specify its setting. The reader never learns where or when the poem happens. The poem’s form—a Shakespearean sonnet—and its elevated diction give it a timeless feel; looking at the poem, it’s hard to tell if it was written in 1919 or 1819 or 1719. This is intentional, in that the poem is meant to encourage resistance to all forms of oppression and to offer support to oppressed communities everywhere and anywhere. To locate the poem in a particular time and place might diminish its capacity to speak to all times and all places; lacking a precise setting makes it useful to anyone who needs encouragement when fighting oppression.

However, because of McKay’s involvement in anti-racist struggles in Jamaica and the United States in the 1910s and 1920s, the poem is often read in relation to the long struggle for Black civil rights in North America and the Caribbean. Undoubtedly, this historical context was at least partially in McKay’s mind when he wrote “If We Must Die.” But he refuses to make the poem *exclusively* about those struggles, suggesting instead that all such struggles are closely connected and keeping the poem's setting effectively universal.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

“If We Must Die” is a Shakespearean sonnet. The sonnet has a long and prestigious history in European poetry. Though it was initially a kind of popular song sung in medieval Italian taverns, poets like Dante and Petrarch transformed it into an elevated form of love poetry. And following their example, poets in France and eventually England wrote their own love sonnets. Shakespeare himself wrote sonnets about love—though he adopted a slightly different form than the Petrarchan sonnet (and eventually that form took his name). In the 17th century, poets began to lose patience with all the sonnets about love and instead began to explore the form’s other possibilities, writing poems about politics and religious issues. For example, John Milton, one of the poets McKay most admired, wrote the sonnet “On the Late Massacre in Piedmont” (also called “Sonnet 18) about a massacre of protestants in Piedmont, Italy.

McKay works in this later tradition. His sonnet is not about love—and unlike some poets (like John Donne, in his Holy Sonnets), he does not play with or reuse the language around love. McKay’s interest in the form seems to have less to do with its traditional subject matter and more with its prestige: the poem proves that one doesn’t have to be a dead white man to write a great sonnet. Additionally, with its complicated restrictions and formal requirements, the sonnet form might represent the tight constraints and limitations that European societies placed on colonized peoples and places.

McKay wrote “If We Must Die” as a young man in 1919. In the following years, he would become a prominent member of the literary movement known as the Harlem Renaissance, a group of Black artists and intellectuals that included writers like Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston. The literature of the Harlem Renaissance celebrates Black life, Black traditions, and protests racism. “If We Must Die” is an important early contribution to the literature of the Harlem Renaissance and a powerful example of its political energy.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

“If We Must Die” was written in 1919, a complicated and pivotal time in world history. World War I had come to a close; the Communist Party was tightening its control on Russia; and, after several centuries of colonialism, European powers like England had extended empires across the globe. It was thus a time of struggle, in which many intellectuals were questioning basic things about their societies, and it was also a time of intense oppression for many different groups across the globe.

"If We Must Die" addresses all of these struggles. It is an intentionally vague poem, refusing to limit its call to arms to a single struggle or historical situation. Furthermore, "If We Must Die" presents a strong argument about how to best achieve freedom from oppression. While some prominent intellectuals like Mahatma Gandhi and Henry David Thoreau argued for non-violent forms of resistance, "If We Must Die" suggests that violent resistance is the best response for all oppressed peoples.

However, the poem also almost certainly responds to more specific events in America, where McKay had lived for several years. In the summer of 1919, white mobs across the United States attacked Black communities and businesses. Hundreds of Black people (along with some white people) died and many thousands were displaced. These attacks were prompted by larger societal circumstances, including fears that communists had infiltrated black communities; the demobilization of World War I veterans; and the resulting unemployment. McKay reportedly wrote "If We Must Die" in response to these attacks—but he was careful not to link the poem too closely to them, instead allowing it to speak to a broad range of struggles for freedom.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Biography of Claude McKay — A detailed biography of poet Claude McKay from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/claude-mckay)
- A New African American Identity: The Harlem Renaissance — A history of the Harlem Renaissance from the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History. (https://nmaahc.si.edu/blog-post/new-african-american-identity-harlem-renaissance)
- "If We Must Die" Read Aloud — Listen to the poem read by the poet himself. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L_xpilVoWuo)
- The Red Summer of 1919 — A history of 1919's so-called "Red Summer," from the Equal Justice Initiative. (https://eji.org/reports/online/lynching-in-america-targeting-black-veterans/red-summer)
- Claude McKay Discusses "If We Must Die" — Claude McKay himself talks writing this poem. (https://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/m_r/mckay/mustdie.htm)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER CLAUDE MCKAY POEMS

- America
- Harlem Shadows
- The Harlem Dancer
- The Tropics in New York
- The White House

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