

English

Writing about 'If We Must Die'

Lesson 5 of 5

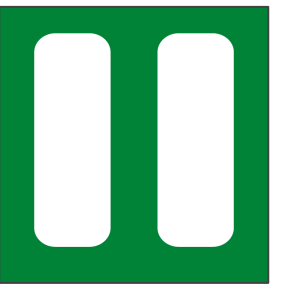
Ms Turner



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!

'If We Must Die'
by Claude McKay





Introduction

McKay's, 19____ poem, 'If We Must Die' is considered by many to represent the beginning of _____. It symbolises the continued struggle against o_____ experienced by many Americans of African descent, as well as the voice of self-empowerment that black Americans expressed through a_____, l_____ and m_____. In the poem, McKay uses a variety of _____, along with the _____ form and structure to highlight the realities of r_____ oppression and challenge its denial of black humanity.

You can use this one - just fill in the gaps - or create your own.





Paragraph 1 (Form)

Topic sentence: Firstly, McKay uses the traditional Shakespearean sonnet form and structure to show the dignified voice of the oppressed and challenge the lack of humanity they face.

Supporting details

1. conflict - **instead of traditional inner conflict, shows controlled response to external conflict**
2. heroic - **similar to African-American soldiers coming back from war**
3. rhyme pairs - **die-defy, brave-grave, back-pack. Resistance to oppression**

Concluding sentence: We can see that McKay uses the tight framework of the sonnet to explore what might happen if the 'men' of the poem broke free from oppression by 'fighting back'.





Paragraph 2 (Imagery)

Topic sentence: Secondly, McKay challenges oppression through his use of imagery of humanity to describe the speaker's community and bestial brutality to describe the oppressors.

Supporting details

1. **'mad and hungry dogs'/'monsters'/'murderous, cowardly pack' - lack humanity**
2. **'pressed to the wall'/'precious blood' - dignified, noble**
3. **'bark' 'mock' - plosives, harsh/violent**

Concluding sentence: The poem shows solidarity in the face of this violence and emphasises the dignity of the African-American community who face this oppression.





Paragraph 3 (Structure)

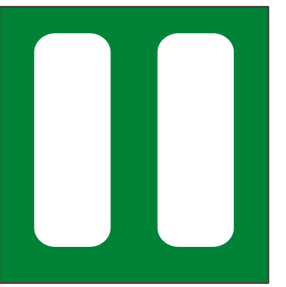
Topic sentence: Lastly, McKay uses the structure of the poem to challenge the reader to stand up against oppression.

Supporting details

1. **'O kinsmen! we must meet the common foe!' (volta) - call to action**
2. **'What though before us lies the open grave?' (question) - freedom**
3. **'fighting back!' (answer) - resistance**

Concluding sentences: This is powerful because of the tragic acceptance that the oppressed in this case will still die. It also provides a message of resistance, power and freedom in the face of violence.





Conclusion

In conclusion, McKay's poem challenges oppression but also shows the tragic consequences for the oppressed group. The magazine editor Frank Harris captured this on his first read of the poem, where he told McKay: "That is a great poem, authentic fire and blood; blood pouring from a bleeding heart." 'If We Must Die' sets a challenge which is both powerful and painful.

You can use this one or create your own.



How does McKay challenge oppression in 'If We Must Die'?



1. Write out your **introduction**
2. Use your notes from **paragraph one** to write a paragraph on how McKay uses the sonnet form to challenge oppression
3. Use your notes from **paragraph two** to write a paragraph on how McKay uses imagery (metaphors and sounds) to challenge oppression
4. Use your notes from **paragraph three** to write a paragraph on how McKay uses structural techniques (the volta, question and answer) to challenge oppression
5. Write out your **conclusion**
6. **Resume** the video to **check** your work

