

If We Must Die¹

Claude McKay

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! 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!

Textual Note

This poem first appeared in *The Liberator* (July, 1919). It later appeared in:

- *The Messenger* (September, 1919)
- *The Crusader* (September, 1919)

In its appearances in *The Liberator*, *The Crusader*, and *The Messenger*, the poem is broken into two distinct linegroups, an octet and sestet. In *The Messenger* and *The Crusader* even numbered lines are indented. When it appeared in *The Messenger*, the poem was included in an editorial (also titled “If We Must Die”).

Editorial Notes

1. “If We Must Die” is surely McKay's most famous poem. He recounts its origin in *A Long Way From Home*:

Among my new poems there was a sonnet entitled “If We Must Die.” It was the most recent of all. Great events had occurred between the time when I had first met Frank Harris and my meeting with Max Eastman.

1 Die] . *add. Cru.*

1 ,] – *Lib.*

2 ,] . *Cru.*

4 accursèd] accursed *Mes., Cru., Lib.*

5 ,] – *Lib., Cru.*

5 O] oh, *Lib., Mes., Cru.*

8 us] , *add. Mes., Cru.*

9 O] Oh, *Lib., Mes., Cru.*

9 we] We *Lib., Mes., Cru.*

9 !] ; *Lib., Mes., Cru.*

10 outnumbered] , *add. Mes., Cru.*

10 show us] still be *Lib., Mes., Cru.*

10 ,] . *Mes.*

14] – *Lib., Mes., Cru.*

The World War had ended. But its end was a sign for the outbreak of little wars between labor and capital and, like a plague breaking out in sore places, between colored folk and white.

Our Negro newspapers were morbid, full of details of clashes between colored and white, murderous shootings and hangings. Traveling from city to city and unable to gauge the attitude and temper of each one, we Negro railroad men were nervous. We were less light-hearted. We did not separate from one another gaily to spend ourselves in speakeasies and gambling joints. We stuck together, some of us armed, going from the railroad station to our quarters. We stayed in our quarters all through the dreary ominous nights, for we never knew what was going to happen.

It was during those days that the sonnet, "If We Must Die," exploded out of me. And for it the Negro people unanimously hailed me as a poet. Indeed, that one grand outburst is their sole standard of appraising my poetry. It was the only poem I ever read to the members of my crew.

In his autobiography, McKay also describes the strong desire that Frank Harris, editor of *Pearson's*, had to publish the poem; McKay, however, had already committed to publishing the poem in *The Liberator*, edited by Max Eastman:

I was keen about the poem appearing in *The Liberator*, because of that magazine's high literary and social standard. Although I esteemed Frank Harris as a great critic, *Pearson's* was *his* magazine only, a one man magazine, smashingly critical, daringly so about social problems, yet having no constructive social program. But *The Liberator* was a group magazine. The list of contributing editors was almost as exciting to read as the contributions themselves. There was freeness and a bright new beauty in those contributions, pictorial and literary, that thrilled. And altogether, in their entirety, they were implicit of a penetrating social criticism which did not in the least overshadow their novel and sheer artistry. I rejoiced in the thought of the honor of appearing among that group.

McKay recorded this poem for the Folkways LP *Anthology of Negro Poetry* released in connection with Arna Bontemps's edited collection of the same title. McKay introduces the poem on that recording:

"If We Must Die" is the poem that makes me a poet among colored Americans. Yet frankly, I have never regarded myself as a Negro poet. I have always felt that my gift of song was something bigger than the narrow confining limits of any one people and its problems. Even though many of my themes were racial, I wrote my poems to make a universal appeal. When "If We Must Die" was first published in 1919 it was denounced by many conservative white leaders as evidence of a new spirit among Negroes. Senator Henry Cabot Lodge read it into the records of Congress, but times change, and so I was not at all surprised when during the Nazi air blitz on Britain, an English anthologist requested the use of "If We Must Die" for an anthology of verse. But I was surprised by what happened when I turned on my radio one morning in 1944. A commentator was telling about the death of a young, white American soldier on the Russian front. The commentator went on to say that the youth was a lover of poetry and he proceeded to read one of five poems which had been discovered on the death youth's body. And he read "If We Must Die." The commentator did not mention the name of the author, Claude McKay, nor did he state that the poem was the work of a colored man. Perhaps he did not know. But I felt profoundly gratified and justified. I felt assurance that "If We Must Die" was just what I intended it to be, a universal poem. And wherever men are pressed, with their backs against the wall, abused, outraged, and murdered, whether they are minorities or nations, black or brown or yellow or white, Catholics or Protestants or Pagans, fighting against the terror, "If We Must Die" could be appropriately read.

Recordings of both the introduction and the poem itself can be found online.

- McKay Introducing "If We Must Die" <<https://archive.org/details/IfWeMustDieIntroduction>>
- McKay Reading "If We Must Die" <<https://archive.org/details/ClaudeMckayIfWeMustDie>>