

If We Must Die, Claude McKay

Claude McKay: "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 era 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 dead 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, hiding against the terror, "If We Must Die" could be appropriately read.

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 accursed lot.
If we must die—oh, 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!
Oh, Kinsmen! We must meet the common foe;
Though far outnumbered, let us show us brave,
And for their thousand blows deal one deathblow!
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!