

RESISTANCE AND REBELLION IN CLAUDE MCKAY'S *IF WE MUST DIE AND TO THE WHITE FIENDS*

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Abstract

*The paper aims to explore the potent symbols of struggle, resistance, and rebellion in Claude McKay's seminal poems *If We Must Die* and *To the White Fiends*. McKay employs vivid imagery, compelling diction, and poignant metaphors to articulate a defiant response to racial oppression and violence in early 20th-century America. *If We Must Die* serves as a rallying cry for dignity and resistance in the face of certain death, transforming the poem into a universal anthem of courage. Conversely, *To the White Fiends* directly confronts and condemns the perpetrators of racial injustice, using stark and accusatory language to unmask the hypocrisy and brutality of white supremacy. This paper delves into McKay's use of poetic symbolism to convey the themes of defiance and resilience. McKay's work is emblematic of resistance poetry, a genre that seeks to confront and challenge societal injustices through literary expression. His poems *If We Must Die* and *To the White Fiends* are particularly poignant examples, encapsulating the spirit of rebellion and the fight for dignity in the face of systemic racism. McKay's poetry not only reflects the turbulent era of its creation but also resonates with contemporary movements against racial discrimination, underscoring the enduring power of literary expression in the fight for human rights. This paper sheds light on the broader implications of McKay's work within the framework of African American literature and resistance poetry. This study contributes to the understanding of McKay's literary legacy and the enduring power of resistance poetry as a tool for social change. This underscores the relevance of McKay's work in contemporary discussions on race and justice, reaffirming the potency of poetry as a medium of resistance.*

Keywords: *resistance poetry, racial oppression, Harlem renaissance, symbolism, African American literature.*

Introduction

Resistance poetry is a form of literary expression that emerges from the need to confront, challenge, and critique social, political, and cultural injustices. It serves as a powerful medium for marginalized voices to articulate their struggles, aspirations, and visions for change. This genre of poetry spans various historical periods, geographical regions, and cultural contexts, yet it is unified by its commitment to resisting oppression and advocating for justice. It has roots in various historical movements and contexts, often arising in response to colonialism, slavery, racial discrimination, political oppression, and social inequality. Throughout history, poets have used their craft to speak out against tyranny and advocate for the rights of the oppressed. In colonial and postcolonial contexts, resistance poetry has been a crucial tool for expressing anti-colonial sentiments and reclaiming cultural identities. Poets from colonized nations used their writings to resist the cultural erasure and political domination imposed by colonial powers. For instance, African, Caribbean, and South Asian poets have often critiqued the legacies of colonialism and articulated their desires for independence

and self-determination. In the United States, the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s inspired a wealth of resistance poetry. African American poets like Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Amiri Baraka used their poetry to highlight the injustices of segregation and racism while calling for equality and justice. Similarly, during the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa, poets like Dennis Brutus and Mongane Wally Serote used their verses to condemn the brutal regime and inspire hope for a liberated future.

Resistance poetry also plays a vital role in feminist and LGBTQ+ movements, challenging patriarchal norms and advocating for gender and sexual equality. Poets like Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, and Pat Parker have used their work to confront sexism, homophobia, and the intersectional oppressions faced by women and LGBTQ+ individuals. Their poetry often combines personal experiences with broader social critiques, creating a powerful discourse on identity and liberation.

Festus Claudius McKay was born on September 15, 1889, in Clarendon Parish, Jamaica. He was the youngest of eleven children in a relatively well-off farming family.

McKay's parents, Thomas Francis and Hannah Ann Elizabeth McKay, were strong influences on his early intellectual development, with his father instilling in him a love for African heritage and his mother nurturing his poetic sensibilities. Claude McKay's literary career is marked by a prolific output and a significant impact on the Harlem Renaissance, a cultural movement during the 1920s and 1930s that celebrated African American cultural expressions. His works span poetry, novels, short stories, and essays, addressing themes of racial identity, social justice, and human resilience.

In 1912, McKay published his first book of poems, *Songs of Jamaica*, followed by *Constab Ballads*. These works, written in Jamaican Patois, celebrated peasant life and criticized colonial rule. Encouraged by his success, McKay moved to the United States in 1912 to attend Tuskegee Institute but soon transferred to Kansas State University. He studied agriculture but found himself drawn to the literary circles of New York City, where he moved in 1914. McKay's early poetry, such as *Songs of Jamaica* (1912) and *Constab Ballads* (1912), reflects his Jamaican roots. These collections capture the rhythms and dialects of rural Jamaican life and critique colonial oppression. His use of Jamaican Patois was groundbreaking, giving voice to the marginalized and preserving the linguistic heritage of his homeland. In 1919, McKay published *If We Must Die*, a sonnet that became one of his most famous works. This poem, written in response to the racial violence of the "Red Summer" of 1919, is a powerful call to resistance and defiance in the face of oppression. It marked McKay's emergence as a key figure in the Harlem Renaissance. Claude McKay's writing style is characterized by a blend of classical forms and vernacular speech, vivid imagery, and a deep engagement with social and political issues. His poetry often employs traditional forms such as the sonnet, while his novels and short stories are rich in dialogue and regional dialects. McKay's poetry is known for its formal structure and emotive power. He frequently used the sonnet form, as seen in *If We Must Die*, combining it with themes of racial struggle and resistance. His poems are marked by their musicality, strong rhythms, and vivid imagery, reflecting both his Jamaican heritage and his engagement with the Harlem Renaissance's artistic

movements. His work addresses a range of themes, many of which revolve around issues of race, identity, and resistance. It explores the complexities of racial identity, celebrating black culture while also critiquing racism and colonialism.

McKay's work has been praised for its raw honesty, lyrical beauty, and commitment to exploring the complexities of black identity. His work has been influential in shaping African American literature and postcolonial studies. In contemporary literary criticism, McKay is often lauded for his pioneering use of vernacular speech, his exploration of the black diaspora, and his challenge to both colonial and racial oppression. His literary contributions have left an indelible mark on both African American literature and global literary traditions. His works offer a powerful exploration of racial identity, social justice, and human resilience, rendered in a distinctive style that combines formal precision with vernacular richness. Despite facing criticism during his lifetime, McKay's legacy endures, celebrated for its pioneering spirit and profound impact on literature and cultural history.

Claude McKay is a seminal figure in the tradition of resistance poetry, using his literary talent to articulate the struggles and aspirations of marginalized communities, particularly African Americans and people from colonized regions. His work stands out for its formal mastery, emotional intensity, and unflinching engagement with social and political issues. McKay's poetry not only captures the spirit of resistance but also helps to define the broader literary movement of the Harlem Renaissance and beyond. His poetic contributions to resistance poetry are multifaceted and profound. Through his powerful imagery, formal mastery, and unwavering commitment to social justice, McKay's work articulates the struggles and aspirations of marginalized communities. His poems like *If We Must Die*, *America* and *The Lynching* not only provide a searing critique of racial and social injustices but also celebrate the resilience and dignity of those who resist oppression. McKay's legacy endures as a testament to the power of poetry as a force for resistance and change.

The poem, *If We Must Die* written during the "Red Summer" of 1919, "If We Must Die" addresses the wave of racial violence that swept across the United States,

particularly targeting African Americans. This historical context is crucial to understanding the poem's urgency and call to resistance. The poem served as both a reaction to immediate events and a timeless appeal for dignity and defiance against any form of oppression. McKay's work was part of a broader movement of African American writers and activists who sought to assert their rights and demand justice in a society that systematically denied them both.

The "Red Summer" refers to a series of violent racial conflicts that took place in the United States during the summer and early autumn of 1919. The term "Red Summer" was coined by civil rights activist and author James Weldon Johnson. These events were marked by numerous instances of white supremacist violence against African Americans, resulting in widespread injuries, deaths, and destruction of property. Over two dozen cities across the United States experienced significant racial violence during this period. Major incidents occurred in cities such as Chicago, Washington D.C., Omaha, Knoxville, and Elaine, Arkansas. Chicago Race Riot was one of the most notorious episodes of the Red Summer was the Chicago Race Riot of 1919, which lasted from July 27 to August 3. Washington D.C. Riots: In Washington D.C., rumours of black men assaulting white women led to four days of violent clashes from July 19 to July 23. The conflict involved mobs of white servicemen attacking African Americans, resulting in deaths and numerous injuries.

Defiance Against Oppression in *If We Must Die*

The primary theme of *If We Must Die* is defiance against oppression. McKay uses the poem to rally those who are oppressed to stand up and fight back, even in the face of overwhelming odds. The opening lines set the tone for this defiance:

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. (lines 1-4)

McKay begins with a conditional statement, "If we must die," acknowledging the inevitability of death. This phrase sets a somber yet resolute tone, preparing the reader for a contemplation of mortality. The speaker

immediately asserts that this death should not be "like hogs," a simile that invokes the image of pigs being slaughtered. Hogs are often seen as dirty, submissive animals, and being killed "like hogs" suggests a death that is degrading, passive, and devoid of dignity. By rejecting this type of death, McKay emphasizes the importance of dying with self-respect and honour. This line builds on the previous simile, describing the hogs as "hunted and penned." The word "hunted" suggests being pursued and attacked, while "penned" indicates being confined and trapped, unable to escape. The phrase "in an inglorious spot" highlights the shame and lack of honour associated with such a death. It conjures an image of being cornered and slaughtered in a place that is ignoble and humiliating. The use of "inglorious" contrasts sharply with the speaker's desire for a dignified death, further emphasizing the rejection of a degrading end. McKay introduces the oppressors as "mad and hungry dogs." This metaphor dehumanizes the oppressors, depicting them as rabid, vicious animals driven by primal instincts. The word "mad" suggests insanity and uncontrollable aggression, while "hungry" implies a desperate, predatory need. The barking dogs symbolize the relentless and irrational violence faced by the oppressed. This imagery paints a vivid picture of a hostile and threatening environment, heightening the sense of danger and urgency. The final line of the quatrain describes the oppressors as mocking the victims' "accursed lot." The word "mock" indicates ridicule and scorn, showing that the oppressors not only inflict violence but also take pleasure in the suffering of the oppressed. "Accursed lot" refers to the unfortunate and cursed situation of the oppressed, emphasizing their undeserved suffering and the injustice of their plight. This line underscores the cruelty and inhumanity of the oppressors, while also highlighting the speaker's awareness of their dire circumstances.

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!
(line 5-8)

The second quatrain of Claude McKay's sonnet *If We Must Die* continues the poem's exploration of resistance,

dignity, and the quest for honorable death in the face of oppression. This line reiterates the inevitability of death introduced in the first quatrain ("If we must die") but adds an imperative tone with "O let us nobly die." The word "nobly" contrasts sharply with the degrading death likened to hogs in the first quatrain. Here, McKay emphasizes the importance of dying with honor, bravery, and self-respect. The use of "O" adds an emotional plea, underscoring the speaker's fervent desire for a dignified end. In this line, McKay describes the blood of the oppressed as "precious," signifying its value and worth. The phrase "may not be shed" conveys the speaker's wish that their sacrifice will have meaning and not be wasted. The use of "precious" elevates the humanity and significance of those who resist, countering any attempts by oppressors to devalue their lives. The phrase "in vain" highlights the speaker's fear that their deaths could be meaningless if not accompanied by noble resistance. The term "monsters" is a powerful metaphor for the oppressors, further dehumanizing them and underscoring their cruelty and inhumanity. The word "defy" signifies active resistance against these oppressors, suggesting a courageous stand against overwhelming odds. This line links the nobility of the oppressed with the recognition of their struggle even by their enemies.

The final line of the quatrain asserts that if the oppressed die nobly, even their enemies ("the monsters we defy") will be "constrained to honor" them. The word "constrained" suggests that the oppressors will be compelled or forced to respect the courage and dignity of the oppressed, despite their previous disdain. This acknowledgement serves as a form of posthumous victory, ensuring that the resistance and sacrifice of the oppressed will not be forgotten or dismissed.

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?
 (lines 9-12)

In the third quatrain of Claude McKay's sonnet *If We Must Die*, the poet continues to develop the themes of resistance, solidarity, and bravery in the face of overwhelming oppression. This quatrain focuses on

rallying the oppressed to unite against their common enemy and to fight courageously despite the odds.

This line serves as a rallying cry, addressing the "kinsmen" or comrades of the speaker. The use of "O" adds an emotional and urgent tone to the appeal. "Kinsmen" evokes a sense of familial bond and unity among the oppressed, emphasizing that they are all part of the same struggle. The phrase "meet the common foe" highlights the necessity of confronting their shared enemy. It calls for collective action and solidarity in facing the oppressors, reinforcing the idea that they must stand together to fight back. Here, McKay acknowledges the reality that the oppressed are "far outnumbered" by their enemies. Despite being at a numerical disadvantage, the speaker urges his comrades to display bravery. The phrase "let us show us brave" encourages a demonstration of courage and strength. It emphasizes that their bravery will be a testament to their resilience and determination. The line suggests that true bravery is not measured by the likelihood of success but by the willingness to stand and fight regardless of the odds. This line captures the essence of retaliatory resistance. "For their thousand blows" signifies the relentless and numerous attacks inflicted by the oppressors. In response, the speaker calls for "one death-blow," which symbolizes a powerful and decisive act of resistance. The contrast between the "thousand blows" and the "one death-blow" underscores the idea that a single act of courageous defiance can have a significant impact, even against a much larger force. It reflects the belief that the oppressed can make a meaningful stand through their unity and bravery. The final line of the quatrain confronts the grim reality of their situation. "What though before us lies the open grave?" acknowledges that the fight against oppression may lead to death. The "open grave" symbolizes the imminent danger and the possibility of dying in the struggle. However, the rhetorical question "What though" suggests a defiant attitude towards this threat. It implies that the prospect of death should not deter them from fighting. Instead, it reinforces the idea that the fight for dignity and justice is worth the risk, even if it means facing death.

The closing couplet of Claude McKay's sonnet *If We Must Die* encapsulates the poem's themes of dignity,

resistance, and defiance. It serves as a powerful conclusion, reaffirming the determination of the oppressed to fight back against their oppressors with courage and humanity.

Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,
we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack. (lines 13-14)

This phrase underscores the insistence on facing death with dignity and honor. By stating "like men," McKay emphasizes the importance of confronting their enemies with courage and integrity befitting human beings. This assertion of humanity stands in stark contrast to the dehumanizing treatment often inflicted upon the oppressed. It calls for the oppressed to rise above their circumstances and act with the valor and dignity that their oppressors seek to deny them.

In this part of the line, McKay characterizes the oppressors as a "murderous, cowardly pack." The term "murderous" highlights the violent and lethal nature of the oppressors, who are willing to kill to maintain their power. "Cowardly" suggests that, despite their aggression, the oppressors lack true bravery; they rely on numbers and brutality rather than facing their adversaries with genuine courage. By referring to them as a "pack," McKay dehumanizes the oppressors, likening them to animals who attack in groups rather than as individuals. This imagery contrasts sharply with the nobility and humanity of the oppressed, reinforcing the moral superiority of those who fight back with dignity.

This phrase conveys a sense of being cornered or trapped, with no means of escape. It signifies the desperate situation faced by the oppressed, who are under relentless attack and have nowhere to turn. This imagery evokes a sense of urgency and the dire circumstances that necessitate a strong and courageous response.

The final phrase, "dying, but fighting back," encapsulates the spirit of resistance and defiance that runs throughout the poem. Despite facing imminent death ("dying"), the oppressed refuse to give up. The use of the conjunction "but" highlights the contrast between their dire situation and their unwavering determination to resist. "Fighting back" signifies active resistance and a refusal to succumb passively to their fate. This line emphasizes that even in the face of certain death, the oppressed will

continue to struggle for their dignity and humanity, making their resistance an act of ultimate bravery and defiance.

By concluding with this powerful couplet, McKay leaves the reader with a lasting impression of the bravery and resilience of those who fight against oppression. The poem serves as a timeless call to resist with dignity and courage, no matter the odds.

Insurgency against Racial Oppression *To the White Fiends*

Claude McKay's poem *To the White Fiends* is a powerful example of resistance poetry that addresses themes of racial injustice, anger, and defiance. Written in the context of rampant racial violence and oppression against African Americans, the poem is a direct confrontation with white supremacy and an assertion of black humanity and dignity. *To the White Fiends* also reflects the racial tensions and violence of its time. McKay's direct address to white oppressors speaks to the widespread racial animosity and brutal acts of violence committed against black communities. This poem, like "If We Must Die," is rooted in the historical realities of racial oppression but also transcends its immediate context to speak to ongoing struggles against racism. McKay's poetry was instrumental in giving voice to the collective anger and demand for justice that characterized the early 20th-century African American experience.

The poem begins with an unequivocal condemnation of the racial atrocities committed by white oppressors. McKay addresses the "white fiends" directly, highlighting the inhumanity of their actions:

Think you I am not fiend and savage too?
Think you I could not arm me with a gun
And shoot down ten of you for every one
Of my black brothers murdered, burnt by you?
(lines 1-4)

The speaker begins by challenging the audience's perceptions. They question whether others think they are incapable of extreme violence and revenge. The reference to "fiend and savage" reflects the dehumanizing stereotypes often imposed on Black people. The speaker contemplates the possibility of taking violent retribution for the atrocities committed against Black people, such as lynching and murder.

"Be not deceived, for every deed you do
I could match – out-match: am I not Africa's son,"
"Black of that black land where black deeds are
done?"

"But the Almighty from the darkness drew (line 5-8)

In the second quatrain, the speaker warns against underestimating their potential for retaliation. They claim they could not only match but surpass the violent acts committed by the oppressors. The reference to being "Africa's son" connects the speaker to a heritage and a history of resilience and strength. This line acknowledges the dark aspects of the speaker's heritage, possibly referring to historical conflicts or the harsh realities of life in Africa. It emphasizes a connection to a land and a people with a complex history.

My soul and said: Even thou shalt be a light"

"Awhile to burn on the benighted earth,...(lines 9-10)

The poem takes a turn here, introducing a spiritual dimension. The speaker describes a divine intervention where God draws their soul from the "darkness," which can symbolize ignorance, despair, or violence. The Almighty assigns the speaker a higher purpose: to be a light.

The speaker is given the role of a guiding light on a "benighted earth," which suggests a world of moral and spiritual darkness. Their "dusky face" is intentionally placed among white people, highlighting their differences and the challenge of standing out in a predominantly white society.

Before the world is swallowed up in night,
To show thy little lamp: go forth, go forth!"

(lines 11-12)

In the final couplet, the speaker is called to demonstrate their highest potential and worth, serving as a beacon of light and hope before the world falls into total darkness. The "little lamp" signifies the speaker's unique and crucial role in illuminating the path for others. The repetition of "go forth, go forth!" is an urgent and emphatic call to action, urging the speaker to fulfill their divine mission.

The poem does not merely express outrage; it demands recognition of the wrongs committed and a rectification of these injustices. *To the White Fiends* by

Claude McKay is a quintessential resistance poem that encapsulates the themes of racial injustice, anger, defiance, and the quest for justice. Through powerful imagery and unflinching language, McKay confronts the brutal realities of white supremacy and asserts the dignity and resilience of black people. The poem serves as both a condemnation of oppression and a declaration of resistance, capturing the essence of McKay's contribution to the genre of resistance poetry.

Conclusion

In *If We Must Die* and *To the White Fiends*, Claude McKay eloquently captures the spirit of resistance and rebellion against racial oppression. Both poems, structured as Shakespearean sonnets, use vivid imagery, powerful metaphors, and a strong, defiant tone to convey their messages. In *If We Must Die*, McKay urges his fellow oppressed individuals to face their enemies with dignity and courage, even in the face of certain death. The poem emphasizes the importance of noble death and the moral victory that comes from resisting dehumanization. Through its structure, McKay builds a powerful rallying cry that encourages solidarity and bravery among the oppressed. *To the White Fiends*, on the other hand, confronts the oppressors directly, challenging their perception of the oppressed and expressing a fierce willingness to fight back. McKay's use of harsh imagery and direct language serves to provoke and unsettle, highlighting the anger and frustration of those who suffer under racial violence. Together, these poems exemplify McKay's role as a voice of resistance during the Harlem Renaissance. His work not only captures the intense emotions of anger, defiance, and determination but also serves as a timeless call for justice and equality. Through their masterful structure and poignant themes, *If We Must Die* and *To the White Fiends* continue to inspire and resonate with readers, underscoring the enduring power of poetry as a tool for social change and resistance.

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