If We Must Die

Claude McKay

If we must die, let it not be like hogs
Hunted and penned in an inglorious1 spot,
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
Making their mock at our accursed 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 constrained2 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 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!

1. inglorious: shameful; disgraceful.
2. constrained: forced.

SONNET
Possible answer: The rhyme scheme is abab, cdcd. On the basis of this rhyme scheme, the sonnet is Shakespearean.
If students need help . . . Refer them to page 847 and the definitions of Petrarchan and Shakespearean sonnets.

LITERARY ANALYSIS

SONNET
Possible answer: The speaker decides that he will fight back even if he dies fighting.
If students need help . . . Have them record line groupings and main ideas in the pre-reading chart introduced on page 847.

FORM AND MEANING
Possible answer: The speaker decides that he will fight back even if he dies fighting.
If students need help . . . Have them record line groupings and main ideas in the pre-reading chart introduced on page 847.

DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION

FOR LESS–PROFICIENT READERS
Comprehension Support [paired option]
Have student pairs work together to respond to these questions about “If We Must Die”:
• Who is the speaker?
• What is the speaker’s message? Invite pairs to share their responses. Ask students to explain their thinking by providing examples from the poem.

FOR ADVANCED LEARNERS/AP
Research McKay wrote “If We Must Die” during the “Red Summer,” a term coined by James Weldon Johnson to describe the racially violent summer and fall of 1919 during which African Americans were the victims of violent attacks. Have students research the causes of these events, noting in particular the significance of McKay’s poem as a part of the response to them. Find opportunities for students to present their findings to the class.