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Jan Almay Dr. Butler ENG 234 2 May 2012 "If We Must Die" and the World of a Peacetime Veteran The poem "If We Must Die" by Claude McKay is a poem that can be widely interpreted by many different audiences. In the view of an African American, the poem relates to acts of blatant racism. In the eyes of a male soldier, it encompasses the honor of war. In the mind of a female soldier, it gives insight into the horror of harassment and discrimination in the armed forces. To understand the full meaning of this poem, we must first visit Claude McKay as a young person growing up in Jamaica. Claude McKay was born on the 15th of September in 1890 on the island of Jamaica. He was the youngest of eleven children. At an early age, McKay was sent to live with the eldest brother farther in town. His older brother was a school teacher and was given the responsibility of teaching the youngest of the McKay family. After learning to read young Claude grabbed every book he could find and delved into the magical worlds that they brought to him. At the age of ten he began writing poetry. He won a prize for his poetry in 1912. The prize money enabled him to attend Tuskegee University; however his time there was very brief and he ended up moving to Kansas to study the world of agriculture. His period in Kansas ended with a surge of riots from the Ku Klux Klan (Baker).

In 1914 McKay moved to New York to escape the harsh treatment of african-americans in the Kansas area. After being in New York a short time he invested money in a restaurant, and invested his time and person into a woman by the name of Eulalie Imelda Lewars. After just a short year of having the business and a wife, both investments left his portfolio. The business went under, while his wife went back to Jamaica to give birth to

their daughter. In 1919 McKay became an editor at *The Liberator* in New York. During the summer of 1919 there were 28 public lynchings. This "Red Summer" as it was later named, was the inspiration for one of McKay's most widely quoted, and most known poems (Giles). James Weldon Johnson (an early civil rights activist) wrote that Claude McKay was "one of the principal forces in bringing about the Negro literary awakening" (Baker). The poem "If We Must Die" was not only a poem on the horrifying acts of racism committed in that fateful summer of 1919. It is also a universal poem for any person seeking motivation for their cause.

This poem was so universal that in fact, Winston Churchill quoted much of the poem in a famous speech he gave to the American Congress as an attempt to persuade them to take action in the war. The "never give up" feeling that the poem gives through its motivating tone. McKay's delivery of the poem almost forces the reader to read it as if he/she were reading it to an army before a battle. In the first line of the poem McKay would like the readers to understand that if we know we must die. We should strive to die with honor, not in the bottom of the pack. To emphasize this point he utilizes the dash. This forces the reader to slow down, and read it in a more somber tone: "If we must die—let it not be like hogs." In the second line of the poem McKay expresses how trapped the negro population felt during the Red Summer of 1919; however the line also applies to any "refugee" or "POW" in a war: "Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot." The acceptance of knowing death will arrive eventually gives the soldiers more gusto because they know that they might as well go down fighting.

The next two lines of the poem give the readers a look into the hearts and minds of the “evil ones.” It seems as if they do not have any emotion whatsoever for the victims of the discrimination. They believe that it is their “right” to treat them with hostility. The lines that display this are very harsh, both with the strong sounds of the bursting “b’s”, the tenacious “t’s”, the destructive “d’s” and the “k’s:” “While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs / Making their mock at our accursed lot.” Perhaps the purpose of the harsh consonants was to bring forth a feeling of anger in the people being discriminated against, or in Churchill’s case, the people that were standing by idly as the world was being tormented by war. In the line “While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs”, McKay could be referring to the Klan members that constantly performed acts of violence against all of the black community; however the meaning that is more widely known is of the reference to Nazi Germany during the time of World War Two.

The Nazi’s were “mad and hungry dogs” that sought to destroy the Jewish race (the “accursed lot”) through extreme acts of anti-semitism such as the mass murder of Jews in concentration camps. In the fifth line of the poem, McKay again reminds the reader that if they know death is on the nigh, they should fight even harder so that they can leave this world in honor. McKay also displays the use of the dash again in the fifth line. When reading the poem the orator give a slight pause and emphasizes the second half of the line: “If we must die—oh, let us nobly die.” McKay wishes to tell his audience that if death is inevitable, they should proceed to die with honor, fighting for the cause that they believe in, so that their deaths mean something to the world. McKay further instills this feeling of passion for a cause with the next

line of the poem: " So that our precious blood may not be shed/ In vain." In this line of the poem McKay solidifies the want of meaning in the deaths of the soldiers. The " precious blood" could be referring to the precious blood of Christ, the savior in christianity. Like Christ, McKay wishes that the " precious blood" of the soldiers in both the war on racism, and the war overseas, to not be shed in vain.

The blood could also ring true for the blood of the mass amounts of Jewish people dying every day in the concentration camps in Nazi Germany during the times of turmoil in the 1940's. The next line holds a key to McKay's views on the racist acts during the " Red Summer of 1919", and the opinion that Winston Churchill held during his speech addressing the congress of the United States of America: " Then even the monsters we defy/ shall be constrained to honor us though dead!" Perhaps McKay is conveying the fact that if the " precious blood" warriors in the war on racism, or in World War II must be spilled. Then the enemy must honor those that had died fighting for their cause because they died with a sense of honor, and accomplishment.

McKay expresses his hatred for the members of racist parties by calling them " monsters." Monsters are typically seen as uncontrollable beasts that ravage and plunder the world around them; therefore having a way to " constrain" a monster to any sort of social norm is a large accomplishment. The next three lines of the poem deal with how McKay plans on taking down the " monsters" mentioned in the earlier lines. McKay starts off with a loud call to action " Oh, Kinsmen! We must meet the common foe." McKay is starting to rally his forces in order to take down the horrible beast that is racism itself. Whilst McKay is trying to collect men to fight racism, Winston <https://assignbuster.com/its-a-wonderful-life-analysis-essay-sample/>

Churchill used this line as a way to convince the American Congress that the common foe was Nazi Germany, and that the United Kingdom would not be able to take them down on its own. Both Churchill and McKay know that their cause (at the time) was outnumbered by the evil that seemed to be flooding over everything; however the poem tells us to “ show us brave” and to stay strong through the fight.

McKay uses a boxing analogy to seal off the idea that even though you are out numbered, or are the underdog, doesn't mean you cannot win a quarrel. In boxing one boxer could be constantly wailing on the other boxer; however it only takes one good shot to the chin for even the most experienced boxers to go down: “ And for their thousand blows deal one deathblow!” In final three lines of the poem, McKay speaks to the masses of all men and women involved in a fight against the “ monsters” in their lives. McKay addresses the fact that eventually we all know that we're going to die. He says “ What though before us lies the open grave?” What really does, for all of us, lie before us in our lives? We look at live as a long span of years that will be never ending, but in all reality, our time on this earth is very short. In the grand universe, we should strive to accomplish all that we can, and impact as many people in a positive way in life.

There will always be people in life that want to bring you down, but even when you find yourself “ Pressed to the wall” you must continue to fight back; otherwise you will be on the same level as the people trying to bring you down. Even unto you're last moment in life, keep pushing forward, because even if you're at the very bottom, the only place to go is up. McKay was not the only person that thought this. A woman, recently enlisted in the

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army, faces a world of new challenges as the male population begins to harass, and discriminate against her and her female colleagues. This woman is Peggy Neidig. Peggy Neidig was one of the first women assigned to the 4th Artillery division in the Army. She served between 1978 and 1981 as an information analyst. Her father served in the Air force for 30yrs and served in World War II, Korea, and Vietnam. She told me that “ my father was the sole reason I joined the military.

The only reason I didn't join the Air Force is because at the time, the Army let women pick their jobs.” Neidig believed that the poem related not only to soldiers that fought in wars overseas, or were facing conflicts on the borders of the United States, but also to women in the military. At the time that Neidig began her service to her country, the Women's Army Core (WAC) was being dissolved and it was a time of revitalization in the Army. Instead of the WAC, for the first time, women were being trained as soldiers. For the first time women had to go through the same basic training as the men. Neidig stated that “ it was a constant fight against all of the men. They would push us down during drills, and cheat to make themselves look better if we were ahead of them. It was horrible!” Another thing that Neidig told me that was semi appalling was the amount of sexual harassment that they went through during basic training: “ They would grab us inappropriately, and tell us that they were going to do stuff to us when we were sleeping.

It was honestly very scary for me and my companions.” Neidig related this to the McKay's line “ While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs.” She said that she felt “ uncomfortable” and “ nervous” most of the time she spent at basic training. In order to gain her Intelligence Analyst stripe Neidig had to

attend Leadership school in Pensacola Fl. According to Neidig, in this school she was “ a drop of estrogen in a sea of testosterone.” Being that there were only 4 women and 75 male students. Despite this small number, Neidig was able to graduate a distinguished student with honors, and received the Leadership Award at graduation. After reading the poem she had a consistent opinion throughout it all. War was an honorable thing, and every veteran should be extremely proud that they were honored with the opportunity to serve their country with pride. After being released from the hell that is Basic Training, Neidig was stationed in Pensacola, Fl. In Pensacola she learned “ more about the russian army and their tactics, than about our own military.” The next line that caught her eye brought out a fire in her eyes that in my 3 years of knowing her, I have never seen: “ Oh, Kinsmen!

We must meet the common foe; / Though far outnumbered, let us show us brave.” “ That line really hits home with me” said she as I struggled to keep up with her hyperactive voice: “ Being in Intelligence I was in charge of intercepting and decoding Russian messages over the airwaves. This also meant that if I intercepted any message involving nuclear war, I had the authorization to send a message to a submarine off the coast to launch a nuke pointed at Moscow. Having that responsibility was scary in its self. Oh, this part is asking us if we were brave even if we knew we were outnumbered right? Of course we were! I felt extremely confident serving in our military. I felt that we were always 1 or 2 steps ahead of the russians because of our vast amount of information. We knew that they were planning to invade Afghanistan months before it actually happened. Nothing happened, if we didn't sanction it.” “ Knowing that you could be deployed at

any time" I asked " Were you afraid of death?" Surprisingly Neidig responded without even pausing to think.

" When I was single" she responded " not at all. I was completely prepared to die for my country. The only time I was ever afraid of losing my life for my country was after my baby was born. Then I knew I had more of a responsibility than just to myself." Neidig believed that the poem was very moving, and found it quite appropriate that Churchill used it to help motivate America into joining the conflict in WWII. " If We Must Die" can relate to a wide range of people and situations. From discrimination in the army with women, to discrimination on the streets between blacks and whites. It also serves as a morale booster and provides a very persuasive and positive view on wars and the soldiers that are fighting. After analyzing " If We Must Die," interviewing Neidig, and seeing the fire in her eyes when when she spoke of being in the service; I realized that being a member of the United States Military in any form, is an honor.

Works Cited

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