Sonnet Under Pressure

Read a poem alongside the conflict that shaped its first audience.

ELA.12.R.1.4 "Evaluate works of major poets in their historical context."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline each comparison involving animals, circle every collective word for the speaker's group, and number the historical details in paragraph 1 that could shape a reader's interpretation.

Claude McKay's "If We Must Die"

1. In 1919, Jamaican-born poet Claude McKay published "If We Must Die" in The Liberator, a socialist magazine in New York. That year, white mobs attacked Black communities in more than two dozen U.S. cities and towns during what became known as the Red Summer. McKay did not name a city, a group, or a single event in the poem. Instead, he used the compact structure of a sonnet, a fourteen-line poem with patterned rhyme. The poem appeared while Black newspapers, activists, and communities reported and responded to this violence.

2. "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, 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! / Though far outnumbered let us show us brave, / And for their thousand blows deal one death-blow!" Excerpt from "If We Must Die" by Claude McKay.

3. To evaluate a poem in context, move in both directions. Start with words on the page: repeated pronouns, comparisons, commands, sound patterns, and form. Then place those choices beside reliable information about the time of publication and the poet's audience. Context can sharpen a reading, but it should not replace evidence. A broad claim needs quoted language that supports it. Consider what the poem makes its speakers and listeners do, fear, value, or imagine. Finally, ask whether the poem's formal control changes the force of its language for readers at the time.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How do the comparisons to “hogs” and “dogs” shape the poem’s depiction of the speakers’ danger?

2. Paragraph 1 describes the Red Summer, while the poem names only a “common foe.” How does that historical context help you interpret the phrase “common foe”?

3. What effect do the repeated words “we” and “us,” along with the address “kinsmen,” create in the excerpt?

4. Paragraph 1 identifies the poem as a sonnet with patterned rhyme. How might that formal control affect the force of commands such as “let us nobly die” and “let us show us brave”?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Write a 120 to 160 word evaluation of how McKay’s historical context and at least two quoted details from the excerpt work together. Make a clear claim about what the poem asks its original readers to value or do.

ANSWER KEY

Sonnet Under Pressure

GRADE 12 · ELA.12.R.1.4

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline each comparison involving animals, circle every collective word for the speaker's group, and number the historical details in paragraph 1 that could shape a reader's interpretation. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How do the comparisons to "hogs" and "dogs" shape the poem's depiction of the speakers' danger?	**They portray the speakers as hunted and trapped while portraying their attackers as cruel, predatory, and dehumanizing.**
2	Paragraph 1 describes the Red Summer, while the poem names only a "common foe." How does that historical context help you interpret the phrase "common foe"?	**It suggests that the foe can represent the shared racist violence threatening Black communities, rather than one named person or event.**
3	What effect do the repeated words "we" and "us," along with the address "kinsmen," create in the excerpt?	**They create a collective voice and present resistance as a shared responsibility among connected people.**
4	Paragraph 1 identifies the poem as a sonnet with patterned rhyme. How might that formal control affect the force of commands such as "let us nobly die" and "let us show us brave"?	**The controlled sonnet form can make the urgent commands sound disciplined and deliberate, not chaotic or helpless.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

McKay's poem transforms the danger of the Red Summer into a call for collective dignity. The image of people "hunted and penned" like "hogs" presents racist violence as both brutal and dehumanizing. Yet the speaker refuses the role of helpless prey. Repeated "we" and the command "let us nobly die" create a public voice that asks threatened people to act together. This stance matters in 1919, when white mobs attacked Black communities across the United States. McKay's choice not to name one city broadens the poem beyond a single attack, while its sonnet form gives the speaker's response discipline. The poem does not promise safety. Instead, it measures resistance by honor, solidarity, and the refusal to accept an enemy's definition of Black life.

Accept reasoned interpretations that connect accurate historical context to specific language or form in the excerpt. For the open task, require a clear evaluative claim, at least two relevant quotations, and an explanation of how the evidence supports the claim.