Introduction to Literary Studies

Claude McKay, “If We Must Die” (1919):
African American Poetry and the Literary Tradition

Prof. Dr. Michael Butter
Close Reading
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 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!
What kind of poem is this?

What argument does the speaker make?

How is the argument structured?

Discuss with your neighbor for five minutes.
The Return of the King (2003)
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Context
Claude McKay (1890-1948)
Separate But Equal
The Great Migration, 1916–1930

Map of the Exodusters eventually left Kansas, and Oklahoma for California.

Migration Corridors

- South West to Midwest & Far West
- South Central to Midwest
- Southeast to Northeast

Map by Michael Siegel
Rogers Cartography 2005

3 DEAD, 50 HURT IN RACE RIOT ON CHICAGO BATHING BEACH


(Special to The World.)

CHICAGO, July 27.—Race rioting that started on a bathing beach at 29th Street spread over the section bordering the Black Belt to-night with deadly results. Two negroes and one white man are reported dead, but it was impossible to ascertain the number wounded.

Driven from Beach.

The fighters were driven from the beach and carried their quarrel to Cottage Grove Avenue. Here mob loot broke out. Chief of Police Alcock ordered every man to return to their original homes.
Traces of African-American History
“Negro Dogs.—The undersigned, having bought the entire pack of negro dogs (of the Hay and Allen stock), he now proposes to catch runaway negroes. His charges will be three dollars a day for hunting, and fifteen dollars for catching a runaway. He resides three and one half miles north of Livingston, near the lower Jones' Bluff Road.

‘William Gambrel.’

‘Nov. 6, 1845.’

‘Notice.—The subscriber, living on Carroway Lake, on Hoe’s Bayou, in Carroll parish, sixteen miles on the road leading from Bayou Mason to Lake Providence, is ready with a pack of dogs to hunt runaway negroes at any time. These dogs are well trained, and are known throughout the parish. Letters addressed to me at Providence will secure immediate attention. My terms are five dollars per day for hunting the trails, whether the negro is caught or not. Where a twelve hours’ trail is shown, and the negro not taken, no charge is made. For taking a negro, twenty-five dollars, and no charge made for hunting.

‘James W. Hall.’

‘Nov. 26, 1847.’
But Only Traces …
Why does the poem avoid all explicit references to the racial conflict between blacks and whites in the United States?

Discuss with your neighbor for five minutes.
Stereotypes about Blacks
“In fact, like most men of a good, blithe heart, Captain Delano took to Negroes, not philanthropically, but genially, just as other men to Newfoundland dogs.”
(Herman Melville, “Benito Cereno”)
scientific racism

romantic racialism

common denominator: blacks are animals

blacks are dehumanized
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• the poem “humanizes” blacks

• claims heroic masculinity for blacks

• universalizes the conflict
What about the Form?
Marcel Duchamp, *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2* (1912)
Ezra Pound, “In a Station of the Metro” (1913)

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough.
William Carlos William, “The Red Wheelbarrow” (1923)

so much depends upon

a red wheel barrow

glazed with rain water

beside the white chickens
NARRATIVE
OF THE
LIFE
OF
FREDERICK DOUGLASS,
AN
AMERICAN SLAVE.

WRITTEN BY HIMSELF.

BOSTON:
PUBLISHED AT THE ANTI-SLAVERY OFFICE,
No. 25 Cornhill.
1845.
Langston Hughes, “I, Too” (1925)

I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother.
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes,
But I laugh,
And eat well,
And grow strong.
Tomorrow,
I’ll be at the table
When company comes.
Nobody’ll dare
Say to me,
“Eat in the kitchen,”
Then.

Besides,
They’ll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed—

I, too, am America.