



ISSN Print: 2394-7500  
ISSN Online: 2394-5869  
Impact Factor: 5.2  
IJAR 2017; 3(10): 85-94  
www.allresearchjournal.com  
Received: 14-08-2017  
Accepted: 15-09-2017

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## **Death philosophical, existential and contextual [Circumstantial] dimensions in "if we must die" or the universal poem**

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### **Abstract**

This paper aims to study the notion of Death in Claude McKay's "If We Must Die" on the philosophical, existential and contextual levels. Indeed a thorough analysis following a sociocriticism and a psychoanalytic perspective reveals that this poem may be at the same time a philosophical poem, an existential poem and a contextual poem thanks to the notion of Death it deals with. As a result, we observe obviously that beyond the Black American people to whom this poem was intended (the circumstantial or contextual level), it concerns every human being. Because "we" as human beings are already alive and it is possible that sooner or later "we" will reflect on Death (the philosophical level), and also "we" are already alive therefore no one will escape this human finitude which is Death (the existential level). So the problem of Death concerns us all and is universal.

**Keywords:** Death, existential, philosophical, contextual, human being, universal

### **1. Introduction**

The American social context and the circumstances which preceded the publication of "If We Must Die" having for so long time covered the general meaning of this poem, we observe that the important theme of Death <sup>[1]</sup> which covers this entire poem and raises the following central question: what should we do if we must die? <sup>[2]</sup> seems to be more or less ignored. Thus, in a thorough analysis, we observe that there is a philosophical dimension, an existential (natural) dimension and a contextual (circumstantial) dimension of Death in this poem of McKay that make it a universal one.

And thanks to these three dimensions, this poem goes beyond the borders of time, space and people <sup>[3]</sup> to adapt itself to all the times, all the spaces and all the people <sup>[4]</sup>. These three dimensions of Death covering this sonnet awaken in any reader a perceptive awareness of Death which pinpoints at the same time a certain originality of the poem. That is why the central question in this paper is therefore to know: how this important theme of Death develops itself all along the sonnet to encompass a philosophical dimension, an existential dimension and a contextual dimension?

The theoretical background that will be used in analyzing the philosophical, existential and contextual dimensions of Death in this poem will be theories such as sociocriticism, psychoanalytic criticism, symbolism, and stylistics and as approach; it will be a hermeneutics analysis of "If We Must Die".

It is important to precise in terms of theoretical background that symbolism is really important because McKay's poetic power resides in the frequent use of several symbols and images which are rich in impressions and suggestions, and also in the frequent use of several "correspondences" between the concrete world and the abstract world. Therefore we cannot neglect this theory of symbolism because according to Erol Kayra : «l'important, c'est de

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<sup>1</sup> We have chosen to write this way the central theme of this article

<sup>2</sup> The title of the poem put as a question

<sup>3</sup> We refer here to the people of his period (those who witnessed the publication of this poem) and to the people that this poem was addressed namely the African Americans

<sup>4</sup> We refer here to those people who lived his epoch and to those who came after his epoch

pouvoir bien saisir le sens profond et symbolique du message poétique et d'être conscient de la valeur contextuelle des éléments utilisés en vue de créer l'effet poétique.»<sup>[5]</sup>.

Poetry being defined as «une forme d'expression littéraire caractérisée par une utilisation harmonieuse des sons et des rythmes du langage (notamment dans le vers) et par une grande richesse d'images»<sup>[6]</sup>, it must be pointed out that if it (poetry) «est un jeu, ce jeu a ses règles, qui portent sur la langue, sur le style, sur la versification»<sup>[7]</sup>. As such, stylistics becomes an interesting theoretical approach necessary in this work, because it will enable us to identify "the sense of style"<sup>[8]</sup>.

Sociocriticism is useful in this study because of the existential and circumstantial dimensions of Death and in relationship with the real events that happened in United States. Psychoanalytic criticism is important because of the philosophical and existential dimensions of Death which oblige any human being to be pensive about Death.

This study will revolve around four parts which are: the survey of the whole poetic text of "If We Must Die" in terms of meaning related to the theme of Death, then we will study as follow the philosophical dimension, the existential dimension and finally the contextual (circumstantial) dimension of Death in this poem

## 2. "If We Must Die" and the Theme of Death

When we consider the hypothesis that the meaning here passes through the entire poem<sup>[9]</sup>, we observe that the subject of the poem appears already if one considers the general architecture of the strongly static title "If We Must Die" *If We Must Die*, which is the first illustration or formal confirmation of the theme of Death handled by the poet McKay.

V1 If we must die, let it not be like hogs  
 V2 Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,  
 V3 While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,  
 V4 Making their mock at our accursed lot.  
 V5 If we must die, O let us nobly die,  
 V6 So that our precious blood may not be shed  
 V7 In vain; then even the monsters we defy  
 V8 Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!  
 V9 O kinsmen! we must meet the common foe!  
 V10 Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,  
 V11 And for their thousand blows deal one deathblow!  
 V12 What though before us lies the open grave?  
 V13 Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,  
 V14 Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!

"If We Must Die" as title seems simple but it is rather complex<sup>[10]</sup> because the circumstances preceding the

<sup>5</sup> Erol Kayra, «le langage, la poésie et la traduction poétique ou une approche scientifique de la traduction poétique» (*Meta: journal des traducteurs*, Vol.43, n° 2, 1998), p. 254-261.

<sup>6</sup> Thierry Viellard, *Dictionnaire Universel*, 2è édition (Hachette/Edicef, 1995), p. 930.

<sup>7</sup> Philippe Van Tieghem, *Les grandes doctrines littéraires en France* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1974), p. 16.

<sup>8</sup> Translated from this expression: «le sens du style».

<sup>9</sup> During the period of racial violence against blacks known as the Red Summer of 1919, McKay wrote one of his best-known poems, the sonnet "If We Must Die," an anthem of resistance later quoted by Winston Churchill during the World War II.

<sup>10</sup> This title is simple to understand but also complex on the semantic level because of the multiple denotations and connotations that are derived

publication of this poem are marked by ethnic and racial tensions and violence between Blacks and Whites in the United States as illustrated by the example of J. Lee Greene (in Georgia, 1918).

As far as the title is concerned in its main structure, we can say that the word "If"<sup>[11]</sup> in the title "If We Must Die" refers to a condition of circumstance thanks to the linguistic use of the conjunction "if". The conjunction "if" signifies an absolute condition and puts us in a relation of reciprocity but also in a relation of force and symmetry meaning that if there is X, then there must be Y in return or conditionally: if ... then / if ... therefore / if ... in this case. This conjunction therefore calls for a relation of equivalence, or contradiction, or opposition, or consequence because one emits a condition related to another idea.

Concerning the lexical unit "We Must" in the title "If We Must Die", we will focus on the main poetic code "Must"<sup>[12]</sup> which refers to an obligation, a necessity, to something which obligatory should be, to something absolute. Thus, after the complex linguistic function of the conjunction "if", we are now confronted to the complex linguistic function of the modal verb "must" which calls for the notions of duty (moral or civic), of willingly or forcibly, of obligation, of necessity, of request. It is a modal verb that has only one form.

Concerning the lexeme "Die" in the title "If We Must Die" we have a poetic code (verb) which introduces us to Death semantically and metaphorically to the end, to destiny, to this fatality that anyone cannot escape. Death is therefore something absolute, definite, an end that anyone cannot avoid by any means. Death is therefore the finitude which establishes the end of life on earth and the passage from a visible world to an invisible world. It is also an end that frightens human being.

In clear in this title "If We Must Die", the conjunction "If" establishes the condition and the sentence "We Must Die" establishes the result of the condition. And consequently we have the following denotative and connotative meanings: "If We Must Die" = if we are born to die, if we are born to obligatory die, if we are destined to die, if we absolutely must die, if we are forced to die, if we must certainly die, if we are confronted to Death.

Thanks to the relationship between these two terms<sup>[13]</sup> and thanks also to all these meanings (seven in total), we observe that the title "If We Must Die" itself gives an internal ascending gradation on the semantic level which synthetically bring us to a gradation at three levels which are:

1. If we are born to die: (the tone is right) (gradation level 1) = philosophical dimension.
2. If we are destined to die: (the tone is pensive) (gradation level 2) = existential dimension.
3. If we are confronted to Death (the tone is decisive) (gradation level 3) = circumstantial dimension.

This synthetic three-level gradation leads us to the following analyses:

from this lexical unit and also because of the words which are used to compose this title

<sup>11</sup> A conjunction used to indicate the circumstances that would have to exist in order for an event to happen.

<sup>12</sup> (which is the modal verb "To Must")

<sup>13</sup> Because of the semantic value and the linguistic function of the syntagms chosen by the poet.

Gradation level 1: at this first level, the fact to die is a state of fact therefore we are confronted to the philosophical dimension of Death. And this level 1 (first idea) is justified by the function of the title of the poem.

Gradation level 2: at this second level, the fact to die arouses a reflection therefore we are confronted to the existential dimension of Death. And this level 2 (second idea) is justified by the opposed semantic function created by the repetition of the title twice in the poem (verse 1 and verse 5).

Gradation level 3: at this third level, the fact to die requires a decision therefore we are confronted to the circumstantial dimension of Death. And this level 3 (third idea) is justified by the function of the entire poem.

Thus it is important at the outset to precise that this ascending gradation and all the connotations in terms of meaning lead to the following final schema:

Firstly, we have the first level of gradation: "If We Must Die" (the title): If we are born to die, meaning also: if we are born to obligatory die. Here the tone is right, calm, and observant and we are introduced to the aspect of the philosophical dimension of Death because we ask ourselves a question about Death.

Secondly, we move to the second level of the gradation: "If We Must Die" (verse 1 and verse 5): if we are destined to die, meaning also: if we absolutely must die, if we must certainly die. Here the tone changes a little bit; the poet puts himself in a deep reflection, and is pensive. So we are introduced to the aspect of the existential dimension of Death since henceforth one is convinced that Death is part of the existence and that Death is natural.

Thirdly, we move to the third level of the gradation: "If We Must Die" (title, verse 1 and verse 5): If we are confronted to Death, meaning also: if we are facing Death. Here the tone is decisive and the poet makes decisions and addresses the contextual aspect of Death which highlights the historical context of production of this poem related to the massacres of black Americans during the "Red Summer".

Stylistically, we observe also that the structure of this sonnet reinforces the ascending gradation, the meaning of the expression "If We Must Die" and the theme of Death with which the poem deals with.

In fact, this sonnet of a single stanza can be divided artistically in three stanzas of four verses each, or three quatrains, and a stanza of two verses or a couplet: (3x4) + (1x2). The rhyme scheme is therefore an interlaced rhyme [ABAB] for the first three quatrains and a followed rhyme [AA] for the couplet. As usually when writing his sonnets in this form (structure): (3x4) + (1x2), the poet Claude McKay puts us in an artistic production and scheme in which the title of his sonnet represents his introduction, his three quatrains represent its development or the development of the theme that he wants to write about in the title. And finally his couplet represents his conclusion as if we find ourselves in a dissertation essay. Thus from verse 1 to verse 5 to verse 9, the poet McKay proceeds methodically in order to keep the following rungs:

Verse 1 = IF WE MUST DIE + IMPERATIVE = If we must die, let it not be

Verse 5 = IF WE MUST DIE + PRAYER + IMPERATIVE= If we must die, O let us

Verse 9 = PRAYER + WE MUST + IMPERATIVE= O kinsmen! we must... let us show us

In terms of discourse analysis, it must be said that although the circumstances preceding this particular poem are known or even if blacks are killed and massacred by white people through ethnic or racial riots and violence, it is clear that the poet McKay does not use the expression "If We Must Be Killed". But he uses the expression "If We Must Die" whereas the first expression "If We Must Be Killed" seems much more adequate because it clarifies at first sight the context of this poem based on Blacks massacred by white people. And the reader understands clearly that it is a Death occasioned by the others, that is to say, the white people. That is why the title "If We Must Die" as formulated by the poet is well understood when we approach a philosophical sphere of Death generally speaking. Indeed, either Blacks are "killed", "poisoned", "hung", "shot" or "shot", the result is Death. One thing is certain, they will die finally or they are dead in a word. So either this Death is voluntary "suicide" or not "killed, hung, shot etc." (that is to say, occasioned by someone else) or either this Death is natural (occasioned by old age); all those deaths are summed up in a single Death, the fact to no longer belong to our visible world.

In a word, although the following headlines or titles "If We Must Be Killed", "If We Must Be Hung", "If We Must Be Massacred" would be well chosen from the outset for this poem about the massacre and assassination of Blacks. We believe that the title "If We Must Die" is much more philosophical and much more studied because there is no difference in Death or there is no difference in the fact of "dying" but rather different ways of dying or differences in the conditions of dying. And it must be admitted that, whatever the manners or the conditions, they all lead to a sole end, that of losing life. Therefore the title of the poem is much more philosophical and is well chosen by McKay because the expression "If We Must Die" groups together or equates to all the other deaths <sup>[14]</sup>. This analysis opens the way to the philosophical dimension of Death which is found in the poem "If We Must Die".

### 3. The Philosophical Dimension: Reflect on the Concept of Death

The stake of the philosophical dimension in the poem "If We Must Die" comes from this great concept of Death <sup>[15]</sup> the poem deals with and particularly, it comes from this interrogation or question concerning the reflection that "we" must have on Death. Indeed, the fact to ask a question <sup>[16]</sup> about Death (or the fact to think about Death) in these terms [If We Must Die (or further) what should we do if we must die? <sup>[17]</sup> necessarily leads to a reflection.

Such a reflection turns into a philosophical meditation about a philosophical concept: that is Death. This process of conducting a philosophical meditation on Death by questioning it gives a philosophical dimension to the poem because «le poète porte le penseur vers un nouveau site

<sup>14</sup> "If We Must Die"="If We Must Be Killed", "If We Must Die"="If We Must Be Hung", "If We Must Die"="If We Must Be Massacred", "If We Must Die"="If We Must Be Poisoned", etc.

<sup>15</sup> Through the lexeme "Die"= Death

<sup>16</sup> A question stimulated by and with the use of the conjunction "IF" and which automatically necessitates a reflection

<sup>17</sup> The title of the poem put as a question

métaphysique ... La philosophie entre en dialogue avec la langue poétique»<sup>[18]</sup>.

Death being defined in philosophy as "le concept de la fin de la vie, et appréhension par la pensée de cette fin en tant que signification, ou non signification"<sup>[19]</sup>. The fact to put in mind the problem of Death and lead a reflection on this problem through this interrogative title "If We Must Die" and further what should we do if we must die?<sup>[20]</sup>, immediately, we are moved in the philosophical sphere of this poem: «c'est pourquoi on doit philosophiquement repenser la relation entre les vocables et le réel qui est présent d'une façon singulière et accentuée dans le poème<sup>[21]</sup>»

Indeed, through the title of this poem and precisely with the expression "We Must Die", we are linked to the reality of Death (Die) and more precisely the reality of Death for all people (We)<sup>[22]</sup> as well as the obligation to die (Must)<sup>[23]</sup> for all people. And concerning the reflection that human beings have on Death and which is clearly justified in the syntax of the title of this poem, it should be noted that:

L'homme a tendance à faire de la mort un événement spécifiquement humain...Face à la mort, deux attitudes extrêmes se font face : l'occultation de la mort par le refus, ou la représentation de la mort comme l'événement existentiel unique qui donne sens à tous les autres. Faut-il donc plutôt penser la mort ou l'ignorer?<sup>[24]</sup>.

Selon Søren Kierkegaard, la mort peut être un stimulant pour l'existence, mais cette représentation n'est pas à la portée de n'importe quel homme. Il oppose «l'homme charnel», qui préfère satisfaire lâchement des désirs immédiats, à «l'homme sérieux», à qui la pensée de la mort «[...] donne l'exacte vitesse à observer dans la vie, et [...] lui indique le but où diriger sa course» (*Postscriptum aux miettes philosophiques*, 1846)<sup>[25]</sup>.

La mort n'acquiert de signification positive qu'en fonction d'une théorie de l'être. Tout homme a conscience que son existence est limitée. Cette conscience suscite des questionnements, relayés ou non par la religion, sur le sens de la condition d'être mortel et entraîne différentes attitudes<sup>[26]</sup>.

Dans le cas de l'homme sérieux, la vie est valorisée par la mort. Celle-ci force la prise de conscience existentielle en donnant à chaque moment qui passe une valeur unique et sans retour. L'homme profite de la vie en faisant de chaque instant pleinement vécu une victoire gagnée sur la mort<sup>[27]</sup>.

Beyond this first aspect relating to "the thought of Death"<sup>[28]</sup> or to the fact to put in mind the question of Death, it must be said in a second aspect that Death itself is a philosophical concept or a philosophical notion. And the fact to approach the question or the problem of Death in a clear-cut and explicit way also makes this poem a philosophical poem. Because through the title of this poem, one can have "une méthode spéculative ou philosophique de lecture de la poésie" de McKay et aboutir à "des synthèses philosophiques et des synthèses réelles"<sup>[29]</sup>.

Under the judgment of the philosophical view, the notion of Death necessarily leads to a philosophical reflection. So Claude McKay becomes a philosopher and touches on here the philosophical dimension of Death and thus incorporates to his poem obviously through his title, a philosophical dimension thanks to the concept of Death. Because it is truly a question of philosophizing when reflecting or questioning oneself on Death as it can be seen here:

Pour la philosophie, depuis Platon<sup>[30]</sup> jusqu'à la pensée contemporaine, la question de la mort et de son sens se déploie au fil de jugements aussi antinomiques que celui d'Arthur Schopenhauer, pour qui «la mort, c'est le génie inspirateur de la philosophie», et celui de Vladimir Jankélévitch, selon lequel «on peut douter que le problème de la mort soit à proprement parler un problème philosophique»<sup>[31]</sup>.

In short, Death being a philosophical notion that has been much studied and speculated by the "existentialist philosophy", having it in mind (the concept of Death) through this interrogative title means that McKay is philosophizing on Death. Because since long time and before him, Death has been the subject of several reflections by eminent philosophers such as: Jean-Paul Sartre (*l'Être et le Néant*), Karl Marx, Epicurus, Lucretius, Martin Heidegger (*Être et Temps*), Socrates, Vladimir Jankélévitch (*la Mort*, 1966), Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche etc. Death being seen as the finitude of human being, the end of life, the end of a cycle; the fact to posit clearly the problem of Death in the form ["IF" + WE + MUST + DIE] is to question the problem of Death in the life of any human being identified here by the personal subject pronoun "WE". And which (the personal subject pronoun "WE") takes into account all the human beings without exception because here the word "WE" (meaning also us) takes into account oneself and other or others (you and me). "You" being the other person (s) and me being the "I" who think and which is interchangeable every time the poem changes its reader or writer since reading is also writing. It is therefore clear that obligatorily Death is a common end to all or to all human beings and mortals. So there is of course a relationship between the words that McKay uses and the reality of Death which leads to a philosophical reflection (due to the concept of Death (die), the obligation (must) and the generality

<sup>18</sup> Maeschalck Marc. Questions sur le langage poétique à partir de Roman Jakobson In Revue Philosophique de Louvain. Quatrième série, Tome 87, N°75, 1989. pp. 470-503. [http://www.persee.fr/web/revues/home/prescript/article/phlou\\_0035-3841\\_1989\\_num\\_87\\_75\\_6564](http://www.persee.fr/web/revues/home/prescript/article/phlou_0035-3841_1989_num_87_75_6564)

<sup>19</sup> "Mort (philosophie)." Microsoft® Encarta® 2009 [DVD]. Microsoft Corporation, 2008.

<sup>20</sup> The title of the poem put as a question

<sup>21</sup> PHILOSIS

<sup>22</sup> The pronoun "We" or meaning also "Us" represents all people or all human beings.

<sup>23</sup> This modal reinforces the meaning in the first level of gradation in the title "If We Must Die" in order to mean : If we are born to die, meaning also: if we are born to obligatory die.

<sup>24</sup> «Ignorer ou penser la mort?» in "Mort (philosophie)." Microsoft® Encarta® 2009 [DVD]. Microsoft Corporation, 2008.

<sup>25</sup> «La mort, sens de l'existence?» in "Mort (philosophie)." Microsoft® Encarta® 2009 [DVD]. Microsoft Corporation, 2008.

<sup>26</sup> «La mort, sens de l'existence?» in "Mort (philosophie)." Microsoft® Encarta® 2009 [DVD]. Microsoft Corporation, 2008.

<sup>27</sup> «La mort, sens de l'existence?» in "Mort (philosophie)." Microsoft® Encarta® 2009 [DVD]. Microsoft Corporation, 2008.

<sup>28</sup> A translation of this expression : "la pensée de la Mort"

<sup>29</sup> Maeschalck Marc. Questions sur le langage poétique à partir de Roman Jakobson. In: Revue Philosophique de Louvain. Quatrième série, Tome 87, N°75, 1989. pp. 470-503. [http://www.persee.fr/web/revues/home/prescript/article/phlou\\_0035-3841\\_1989\\_num\\_87\\_75\\_6564](http://www.persee.fr/web/revues/home/prescript/article/phlou_0035-3841_1989_num_87_75_6564).

<sup>30</sup> L'une des plus anciennes réflexions sur la mort vient de Platon, dans *le Phédon* In «Philosopher, c'est apprendre à mourir» in "Mort (philosophie)." Microsoft® Encarta® 2009 [DVD]. Microsoft Corporation, 2008.

<sup>31</sup> «Ignorer ou penser la mort?» in "Mort (philosophie)." Microsoft® Encarta® 2009 [DVD]. Microsoft Corporation, 2008.

without exception that is made through the personal subject pronoun "we").

The theme of Death put as a question and as a subject of reflection in the title of this poem appears as a postulate for every human being. And that requires necessarily a philosophical reflection of the thinking reader and also an awareness of «degré zero» through a speculative reading. But also that requires awareness on a personal degree through an interpretive or hermeneutic reading of the poem and that begins first of all through the title of the poem because it is the outset and everything goes from here. The moral conscience (consciousness) and the psychological consciousness (reflexive, thinking subject) interact in front of this great question which is that of Death.

In clear, Death as the theme and postulate of (and in) this poem gives a philosophical dimension to this poem and constitutes (Death) a permanent reflection for every human being all his life: what should we do if we must die?

du degré zéro de compréhension constitué par le texte en tant que texte et énoncé... on passe à l'écoute de la vibration d'un dire... Cette énonciation, ce dire par-delà le dit, a sa racine dans une 'sensibilité fondamentale' ... et celle-ci détermine un lieu métaphysique qui rend possible la reprise pensante de la parole du poète <sup>[32]</sup>.

Naturally, reflect on Death means also to lead a philosophical reflection which involves God, creation, Holy Scriptures and human weaknesses (because humans are limited in time and space). This philosophical reflection on Death is resolved by the fact that Death is natural and posits itself as the natural order of things for every human being. This leads us to the natural or, let's say, the existential dimension of Death in the poem "If We Must Die".

#### 4. The Existential Dimension: Death Is Part of Existence, Death Is Natural

The poem "If We Must Die" involves an existential dimension which is the fact of speaking about Death, the finitude of any human being meaning also the end of existence for any human being.

Du point de vue de la biologie, la science qui étudie la vie, la mort est considérée comme un fait nécessaire à tout organisme vivant, inscrit dans sa nature même d'être physique. Elle est définie comme l'arrêt complet et irréversible des fonctions d'un organisme vivant, avec disparition de sa cohérence fonctionnelle et destruction progressive de ses unités cellulaires et tissulaires <sup>[33]</sup>.

Si l'on considère la mort naturelle — et non accidentelle — comme un processus organique, propre à tout être vivant, celui-ci, à partir du moment où il naît, commence déjà à mourir. La mort est un processus enraciné dans la vie, et c'est en ce sens que Martin Heidegger définit l'être humain en termes d'« être pour la mort » <sup>[34]</sup>.

To talk about Death <sup>[35]</sup> a natural fact which is part of existence for all beings and therefore for any human being defined as «l'être pour la mort» is more pragmatic and

realistic on the part of this poem but especially about the kind of life to be lived. Indeed the problem of Death and namely the reflection that humans have about Death in order to know what kind of life one should live or what choice of lifestyle one should make are often approached differently or simply avoided according to the psychology of the concerned human being.

Death being an existential problem, the fact to approach it in an explicit and realistic way in order to rethink one's life or one's existence with the postulate that one day we shall die and therefore be realistic vis à vis to this human finitude makes this poem an existential poem.

La mort constitue une menace dans la mesure où l'homme est sûr de sa venue, mais incertain du moment où il partira. Jean-Paul Sartre, dans *l'Être et le Néant* (1943), démontre l'absurdité de cette situation existentielle face à l'angoisse de la mort, chaque individu n'ayant d'autre choix que d'accepter son destin (*voir existentialisme*)... Devant la menace que la mort représente, l'homme tente de s'y préparer, même si elle constitue un objet psychique que l'expérience ne peut lui faire appréhender : nul ne peut expérimenter sa propre mort <sup>[36]</sup>.

Due to the fact that Death is part of existence, "every human is conscious that his existence is limited" <sup>[37]</sup> thus the existential dimension of Death occasions a kind of "existential awareness" <sup>[38]</sup> and everyone wants to give [especially "in the case of the serious man"] meaning to his life:

Dans le cas de l'homme sérieux, la vie est valorisée par la mort. Celle-ci force la prise de conscience existentielle en donnant à chaque moment qui passe une valeur unique et sans retour. L'homme profite de la vie en faisant de chaque instant pleinement vécu une victoire gagnée sur la mort <sup>[39]</sup>.

When we take such a perspective of a natural and unavoidable Death which is part of existence, we observe that Claude McKay dictates the following prescriptions and advice according to which the time X of life should be a time X of useful life, an utilitarian and worthy life:

V1 If we must die, let it not be like hogs  
 V5 If we must die, O let us nobly die,  
 V6 So that our precious blood may not be shed  
 V7 In vain; then even the monsters we defy  
 V8 Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!

Through these verses and prescriptions, we observe that for McKay, the natural aspect of Death [which emerges from the polysemic reading of the poem] calls for a dignified life or a life of dignity on behalf of human being because after life it's Death. That is why we should retain the following important scheme which gives us the advice or the teachings on how to live or how to die:

1 IF WE MUST DIE LET IT NOT BE LIKE ...  
 2 IF WE MUST DIE LET IT BE NOBLY

Thus the interesting pattern that emerges is that of refusing a certain way of dying and at the same time choosing another

<sup>32</sup> Maeschalck Marc. Questions sur le langage poétique à partir de Roman Jakobson. In: Revue Philosophique de Louvain. Quatrième série, Tome 87, N°75, 1989. pp. 470-503. [http://www.persee.fr/web/revues/home/prescript/article/phlou\\_0035-3841\\_1989\\_num\\_87\\_75\\_6564](http://www.persee.fr/web/revues/home/prescript/article/phlou_0035-3841_1989_num_87_75_6564).

<sup>33</sup> «La mort comme phénomène naturel» in "Mort (philosophie)." Microsoft® Encarta® 2009 [DVD]. Microsoft Corporation, 2008.

<sup>34</sup> «La mort comme phénomène naturel» in "Mort (philosophie)." Microsoft® Encarta® 2009 [DVD]. Microsoft Corporation, 2008.

<sup>35</sup> The reality of being mortal

<sup>36</sup> «La mort comme phénomène humain» in "Mort (philosophie)." Microsoft® Encarta® 2009 [DVD]. Microsoft Corporation, 2008.

<sup>37</sup> A translation of this sentence: "tout homme a conscience que son existence est limitée"

<sup>38</sup> A translation of this expression: "prise de conscience existentielle"

<sup>39</sup> «La mort, sens de l'existence?» in "Mort (philosophie)." Microsoft® Encarta® 2009 [DVD]. Microsoft Corporation, 2008.

way of dying. And since by extension of symbols or semantic, we realize that "life is valued by death" <sup>[40]</sup> then we conclude that this refusal of a way of dying is also understood by the refusal of a certain way of life. And the acceptance of another way of dying is justified by the acceptance of another way of life. Due to the fact that Death is natural and an existential phenomenon, it pushes human being to a reflection that can lead to the choice about the way to die and therefore to the choice about the way to live. And consequently some poetic codes in McKay's prescriptions ("nobly, our precious blood, to honor us") clarify us about the good quality of life and Death that one should have instead of another bad quality of life that one could refute as it is well stated in the semantic unit of the verse 1: "If we must die, let it not be like ..."

Indeed, as shown by the opposed semantic function of the repetition of the title twice in the poem (verse 1 and verse 5), the first repetition refuting a state of fact and the second repetition accepting another state of fact:

- 1 IF WE MUST DIE, LET IT NOT BE LIKE...
- 2 IF WE MUST DIE, LET IT BE LIKE...

One should keep in mind that it is necessary to live a useful life of combat which advocates a dignified Death. This message concerning the refusal of a situation A for the acceptance of a situation B obliges and encourages all human beings to review their life, to improve their existence and living conditions and thus to "succeed" in life, live in progress for a better being. A better being which is traduced through the values of "nobility, precious, and honor".

It is therefore a struggle for change and then improvement for a better being in human existence necessarily affecting the social, political, cultural and economic levels. A struggle, that also brings out the notions of courage, ambition and hope. This poem, through the prescriptions given by McKay and according to the opposed semantic function between verse 1 and verse 5, is initially of didactic quality because the poet conveys a message and teaches "the way of dying" to "we" <sup>[41]</sup>.

It is of course a reality that we <sup>[42]</sup> shall all die ("we must die"), but we should not die like pigs ("let it not be like hogs"). So the fight to be led is to do not die like a pig. And due to the fact that "life is valued by death" then do not die like a pig also means do not have a pig life. The poet thus formally teaches a new way of dying and consequently a new way of living through the repetition (anaphora) of his title "If We Must Die" which connects two ideas: do not die like a pig but rather die nobly.

Here the lexeme used by the poet McKay is very symbolic because the pig ("hog") in a pejorative way has several connotations: (individu malpropre ou mal organisé, individu malhonnête et déloyal, individu vicieux et lubrique, individu détestable à tous égards) <sup>[43]</sup>. And this means that to qualify a person of being a pig automatically is opposed to the semantic of "the serious man". Moreover when we go back to the literal meaning or to the first meaning of the lexeme

"hog" which is an animal, we observe that it is a very fair way for McKay to differentiate human being from animal. It is a very fair way to raise human being to a higher level which equates to a much more dignified life as well as a much more dignified Death and not a Death that is equivalent to that of an animal and especially that of the pig. In short, in the verse 1, the poet McKay to demonstrate the didactic quality of his sonnet uses again the title "If We Must Die" then automatically accompanies it by an imperative but in the negative form "let it not be like Hogs". So on the one hand, the condition is established "We Must Die" and on the other hand, this does not have to be like an animal.

In the verse 5 (first verse of the second stanza) the poet McKay repeats the same schema as in verse 1. He repeats the title "If We Must Die" and then automatically accompanies it by an imperative as was the case in the first verse of the poem. However this time, the imperative that accompanies the title is in the positive form "let us nobly die". And moreover this imperative is strengthened in a stylistic and semantic way by a prayer or an invocation through the interjection "O" (which is used to address a person or thing, or at the start of a plea or wish). "O" plays here in this specific context not only the role of a prayer but also an insistence on the imperative that follows, that is to say "let us nobly die". This poetic code or this interjection plays the role of an awakening, a prayer, and an insistence. Through this prayer and this positive imperative in verse 5, the poet McKay tries to remind every human being in a formal way that the question of Death or the problem of Death obliges us to make a good choice of life through a deep personal reflection.

McKay advocates the refusal of an "animal" situation and the struggle for a worthy situation because a useful and worthy life necessarily calls for a noble Death, a Death of Honor, a precious Death and this message is addressed to all human beings unequivocally or at least to the "serious man" at first. Following the perspective of the existential dimension of Death with the need to have a noble life and therefore a noble Death, and even though in this case, the situation may conducting to Death was contextual. We remark that the dominant aspects of struggling for a noble Death, a Death of honor; have permitted to Winston Churchill to resume this poem officially during the Second World War in order to sensitize his troops going into battle.

### **5. The Contextual Dimension [Circumstantial]: The Historical Context Of This Poem On Death Is Related To The Massacre Of Black Americans During The "Red Summer".**

Through the lexeme "die" stipulated three times in a remarkable syntactic and semantic way, the notion of Death is highlighted in a common and general way thanks to the personal subject pronoun "we" which takes into account all human beings. Thus from the verse 1 to the verse 8, the poem being featured by the intrinsic relationship between the personal subject pronoun "we" and the lexeme "die". We are obliged to understand and respect a reading of this poem in a perspective of a natural, existential and common Death mentioned by the poet McKay and addressed to all human beings. Because the personal subject pronoun "we" corresponds to us and therefore to all human beings with Death being the theme or topic of this octave (V1-V8).

<sup>40</sup> A translation of this expression : "la vie est valorisée par la mort"

<sup>41</sup> We, (personal subject pronoun) being considered as the symbolic representation of all human beings

<sup>42</sup> To refer to all human beings without exception

<sup>43</sup> Microsoft® Encarta® 2009. © 1993-2008 Microsoft Corporation. Tous droits réservés. An essay of translation : (a dirty or ill-organized individual, a dishonest and disloyal individual, a vicious and lustful individual, a detestable individual in every respect)

However when we tackle with the following sextet (V9-V14), we observe over the reading of the poem that McKay makes an important precision at verse 9 "O kinsmen! We must meet the common foe!" An essential precision which necessitates a re-reading and re-evaluation of the semantic of the entire poem quite different from that one could get from verse 1 to verse 8 especially because of the lexeme "kinsmen" meaning :brothers and sisters, members of my community, members of my race. This essential precision calls the following three important questions (who are concerned in this poem? to whom is this poem of McKay addressed? what kind of Death is pointed out here?), while giving the path to a contextual or circumstantial approach of the same poem.

In fact, in a thorough reading of the sestet, we realize that even though it may be the case from verse 1 to verse 8, it can no longer be a question of a natural Death here. A natural Death predestined by God where a person is born, realizes himself and dies. And further, this poem, although it can be addressed to all human beings, addresses itself more precisely to a group of individuals who are black Americans.

V9 O kinsmen! we must meet the common foe!  
 V10 Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,  
 V11 And for their thousand blows deal one deathblow!  
 V12 What though before us lies the open grave?  
 V13 Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,  
 V14 Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!

Obviously, in the quotation above many pertinent details, lexemes and poetic codes such as: "kinsmen", "the common foe!", "Outnumbered", "let us show us brave", "their thousand blows", "deal one deathblow!", "we'll face the murderous"... reframe the reading, analysis and interpretation of the poem and precise the contextual dimension of Death in this poem.

And thanks to such a contextual dimension, we focus the historical context of this poem on Death, a historical context related to the massacre of black Americans occasioned and orchestrated by the white people through racial riots or ethnic and racial violence.

Indeed, likewise the personal experience of racial discrimination experienced by the black poet Countee Cullen, which led him to write the poem "Incident" in testimony of his personal memory of little black in Baltimore. The poet McKay actually writes "If We Must Die"<sup>[44]</sup> in response to the wave of ethnic and racial violence in the United States.

For in the years 1918 and 1919 (as evidenced by the events in Georgia in 1918, from 17 to 24 May) the contingencies of the moment were characterized by racial riots and hard racial violence against Blacks throughout the United States. Thus, the poem "If We Must Die", first published in 1919 by Max Eastman in his symptomatic review titled "The Liberator", stigmatizes the racial riots that broke out in the United States from 1919 to 1920 against Blacks and becomes truly one of the most committed poems of the "Negro Renaissance" movement.

We see here the contextual dimension of Death in the case of the "Red Summer" and relatively to the fate of black

Americans in this same period, but also in the fact of writing a poem of circumstance which consists in writing and publishing this poem at a time when in the United States, Blacks or black Americans were killed in mass in a kind of campaign for the massacre of their race.

That is why, the contextual analysis of "If We Must Die" shows that this poem launches a real message of revolt and awareness to black American people. It is a real emancipation and sensitization of black people in order to take their fate at hand in front of white men determined to kill them. An emancipation and a sensitization that call for change and define the new rules of their death when facing the white men (their oppressors) qualified as "the monsters", "the common foe", "the murderous". And a good exemplum of that ethnic and racial violence vis-à-vis of Blacks linked to the naissance of the poem "If We Must Die" during this period is the real history of massacre linked to the case of Sidney Johnson:

Georgia, 1918: Hampton Smith, a white farmer, had the reputation of ill-treating his Negro employees. Among those whom he abused was Sidney Johnson, a Negro peon, whose fine of thirty dollars he had paid when he was up before the court for gaming. After having been beaten and abused, the Negro shot and killed Smith as he sat in his window at home. He also shot and wounded Smith's wife. For this murder a mob of white men of Georgia for a week, May 17 to 24, engaged in a hunt for the guilty man, and in the meantime lynched the following innocent persons: Will Head, Will Thompson, Hayes Turner, Mary Turner, his wife, for loudly proclaiming her husband's innocence, Chime Riley and four unidentified Negroes. Mary Turner was pregnant and was hung by her feet. Gasoline was thrown on her clothing and it was set on fire. Her body was cut open and her infant fell to the ground with a little cry, to be crushed to death by the heel of one of the white men present. The mother's body was then riddled with bullets. The murderer, Sidney Johnson, was at length located in a house in Valdosta. The house was surrounded by a posse headed by the Chief of Police and Johnson, who was known to be armed, fired until his shot gave out, wounding the Chief. The house was entered and Johnson found dead. His body was mutilated. After the lynching more than 500 Negroes left the vicinity of Valdosta, leaving hundreds of acres of untilled land behind them<sup>[45]</sup>.

Relating to this exemplum above, we understand why in the first stanza (verse 1 to verse 4), McKay describes a scene of hunting black people in order to massacre them using for this reason particularly a vocabulary (poetic codes) linked to hunting expedition toward human being. Thus the first repetition of the title (verse 1) introduces the hunting conditions in which the "we" (reference to the poet and his black community) usually are called to die. The comparison that the poet makes through the semantic unit and the comparison word "like hogs" added to the choice of the vocabulary he uses in the sequel of his ideas through the words "hunted", "penned", "Round us bark the mad and hungry dogs"; introduce us in a sequence of hunting of black people and traduce a sort of state of nature and a sort

<sup>44</sup> During the period of racial violence against blacks known as the Red Summer of 1919, McKay wrote one of his best-known poems, the sonnet, "If We Must Die," an anthem of resistance later quoted by Winston Churchill during the World War II.

<sup>45</sup> J. Lee Greene, «White Things», *Time's Unfading Garden*, (Baton Rouge; London: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), p.123. Pour plus de détails sur les violences ethniques et raciales faites aux noirs dans les Etats-Unis, prière de lire *Thirty Years of Lynching in the United States* (1919).

of absolute savagery in which is made the ethnic violence and the massacres of black Americans.

In view of the white men's mode of operation, McKay identifies the massacred Blacks as "hogs" ("like hogs") just to say metaphorically that they represent animals in the eyes of the white people. So they leave their human beings status to become simple animals. And by extension of symbol, we understand that the poet and his community become the game ("hogs") for the white community so the hunting for "the game man" takes place in the most atrocious way. The choice of the hunting vocabulary used by the poet McKay to render the reality in his poem and for the circumstance traduces in a direct and metaphorical way the pace of ethnic and racial violence between the white community and the black community.

We also observe a personification of the dogs "mad and hungry dogs" used by the white men to chase the members of the black community through the expression "Making their mock at our accursed lot". Such a personification used by the poet is characterized semantically by the fact that the

hunting dogs of the white man are now superior to the black man who becomes a game and the dog becomes a weapon of fighting and a weapon for hunting for this new game which is the black man. The dog of the white man is assimilated to an ally of the white men in their violence and ethnic attacks against the different black populations. In this same verse 4, it must be said that the expression "our accursed lot" is used by the author in a metaphorical style to refer to a sort of curse, a kind of fatality, a kind of destiny for the black man. He also uses this expression because the author believes that they were born to die, to be massacred by the white men. Thus the modal "must" accompanies the verb "to die" to reinforce its meaning in an intense and obligatory manner and this means semantically that it becomes necessary for blacks to die.

In view of this unworthy and savage Death that the white men inflict on the black people, McKay sensitizes his black brothers to no longer accept this kind of ignoble Death, but to fight for their survival or at least to fight for a dignified Death through combat and retort.

So after using the following scheme in verse 1:

1st repetition of title + negative imperative + exposure of the situation  
We must die (necessity) (no longer) (like that)

The author uses the second repetition of the title in verse 5 with the following scheme:

2nd repetition of the title + positive imperative + conditions advocated by the poet  
We must die (necessity) (whatever it is) (now like that)

The repetition of the two "if we must die" instead of being an association of the same idea calls for a contradiction of ideas, especially an opposition between [past / present] or between [present / future]. After having exposed the conditions of the massacres of his people, conditions which he refutes of course thanks to the first repetition of the title. The poet McKay uses a new repetition of the title to advocate new conditions of Death. It is for this reason that he establishes two schemes introduced by the same starting idea (the repetition of the title at two different levels), but this same initial idea does not translate the same ideas at the end, nor the same objectives, neither the same content nor conditions. Thus verse 5 is characterized by the second repetition of the title, a positive imperative and a metaphor that equates the black man with a human being: "If we must die, O let us nobly die". And once re-assimilated to a status of human being, in verse 6 with the use of the vocabulary and poetic expression "precious blood", the poet restores the superior quality of the black human being over the animal to which the white people try to make him be, and to which he is assimilated in the first stanza and particularly in the first verse. The metaphor "the monster" (verse 7) used by the poet to describe the white men in these so-called massacres and ethnic and racial violence against the black community, refers to horror or monstrosity that are involved in the massacres.

The fact to use a form of biblical scripture of praise and prayer through the interjection and the semantic unit "O kinsmen!" (verse 9) allows McKay in a form of prayer to exhort his community of being able to take his destiny at hand in face of the atrocious massacres. But especially as a sensitizer of conscience for his community and for his current role as writer, he advocates change and especially the need to change the current situation of facts and the fate of the black community.

Since in United States, the black community is a minority in a white majority, McKay emphasizes the dominance and superiority of the white men over the black people in verse 10 through mathematical and arithmetical vocabularies (numbers) and particularly through the following syntagms: "Outnumbered", "thousand", "thousand blows", "one", "one deathblow". And while the concept of the dominant race or numerical superiority of the white race is translated by the specific vocabularies ("outnumbered", "thousand", "thousand blows") which translate the reality of the attacks with a higher number of white men. The notion of numerical inferiority of the black race is translated by ("one", "one deathblow").

Before going to his conclusion in verses 13 and 14 (referring to the model of sonnets in the form  $4x3 + 2x1$  with this poet), McKay asks a fundamental question in verse 12 (this verse therefore becomes an interrogative verse)<sup>[46]</sup> which both in the content and form shows that it is rather an address, a message that the poet conveys to his community. This question gives us a schema in which the orator McKay speaks at the precise moment when he writes to his black community like in a conference. In verse 13 and 14, as usual, Claude McKay makes his conclusion, a conclusion through which he answers to his question in verse 12.

But his answer continues in the same sense of exhortation and call for change, call for revolution. In short, in its semantic and contextual dimension, this poem is truly a didactic poem because the poet conveys a message and formally teaches a new way of interacting or reacting to "we", with the personal subject pronoun "We" being the symbolic representation of the black community to which the poet belongs.

<sup>46</sup> The presence of the question mark «?» and the word «what»:a grammatical word used in direct and indirect questions to request information.

## 6. Conclusion

In this thorough analysis, we observe that this poem is intrinsically linked to the notion or concept of Death, a notion which causes the main and important interrogation since the title of the poem and which covers the meaning and function of this entire poem.

Being the core issue in this poem, an in-depth analysis of this concept of Death permits to realize that thanks to this concept the poem has three immeasurable dimensions, namely the philosophical dimension of Death [the fact to reflect on Death], the existential dimension of Death [no one escapes Death which is human finitude], and the contextual or circumstantial dimension of Death [as was the case with the blacks American during the "Red Summer"].

First of all, this poem has a philosophical dimension on the basis of the concept of Death notably through the title thanks to the main question about the fact to die and also in the sense that on a personal level, McKay invites us thanks to this important question to an individual reflection on Death. The poem is therefore transformed in a philosophical poem since its title.

Secondly, this poem has an existential dimension especially from verse 1 to verse 8 in the sense that Death being natural, Death is part of existence and therefore the normal order of things. So the reality of Death after its philosophical thinking forces us into a reality of struggle in life, a struggle for a noble cause, a dignified life and a Death in dignity as demanded by some philosophers, and some persons notably Trotsky, McKay or Winston Churchill. The poem transforms itself into an existential poem about Death when it preconizes a good instead of a bad Death meaning also a good instead of a bad life.

Finally, this poem has a circumstantial or contextual dimension through the fact that its publication was in the American social context and in the context of the "Red Summer", in the interests of the United States, Blacks, Whites, and also in the interests of life and survival relationships between White and Black after the series of wild killings that were perpetrated before and after the publication of this poem. And more specifically, it is McKay's message to his community or to black Americans in the painful experience of ethnic and racial violence.

Beyond this circumstantial aspect and beyond the determination of resistance of the black Americans in 1919, this poem in its general semantic of struggle, resistance, combat and expression of freedom; expresses the feelings of all the oppressed of all times and reaches a universal dimension. And thus is no longer limited only to Blacks' conditions or to the ethnic and racial violence done to Blacks in the United States. It is for this reason that this poem also went around the world and was discovered in 1944 engraved on the body of a young white American soldier fallen to the enemy during World War II.

This poem is therefore a universal one through the concept of Death, which is a universal theme, and it touches the sensibility of every human being since Death happens to be the finitude of any human being.

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