

## **Abstract**

Reading and analyzing ambiguous literary texts are active ways to practice and develop critical thinking skills. If getting to the heart of an abstract text is perceived difficult or near impossible, then students tasked with analyzing an ambiguous text teeter on the verge of giving up analyzing thus giving up on a critical thinking exercise. The problem addressed is that approaching a literary text in any haphazard, emotional-response manner that simply leads students to an incorrect analysis of an ambiguous text and as a result, promotes the fear of failing and fear of analyzing ambiguous texts. In this specific instance of the issue the research paper utilizes Claude McKay's poem, "If We Must Die," to expose the problem. A specific action research situation shows the difference between using an appropriate literary criticism, such as Marxist literary criticism, and not using a literary criticism. The answer to this problem is to utilize reader-friendly literary criticisms for the appropriate literary text.

## Using Marxist Literary Criticism to Read “If We Must Die” in the Classroom

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Langston Hughes gets over two hours of coverage in C-Span’s “Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes and the Harlem Renaissance Writers” series about the Harlem Renaissance while Claude McKay received about three minutes total in the same presentation. Doing a Google Search on “Claude McKay” in the Secondary-level classroom brings scant lesson plans that refer to McKay’s “If We Must Die,” but those few lesson plans fail to see the meaning of the poem. Most Secondary-level teachers see McKay’s most famous poem, “If We Must Die,” as a poem about the Black Struggle at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. If McKay’s most famous poem is about the Black Struggle, then what did Winston Churchill have in mind when he read the poem to the British populace in a radio broadcast during the Blitz? Churchill was not equating the socio-economic disparity and racism against African-Americans to what the population of Britain was going through during the onset of the Second World War. Such a misreading of McKay is understandable when the reader (or teacher) does not utilize the correct literary criticism for a reading that lends itself to a certain literary criticism. Classrooms that only focus on Claude McKay’s “If We Must Die” as a racial uprising are missing the meaning in Claude McKay’s most recognizable poem as a human struggle against oppression as seen through a Marxist literary reading of the poem.

Based on McKay’s life and political stance, using a Marxist literary criticism would be the best fit to finding meaning in McKay’s poems especially “If We Must Die.” Claude McKay (b.1889 –d.1948) is considered by many to be a major writer who sparked the beginning of the Harlem Renaissance with his collection of poems *Harlem Shadows* (NAAL 1005). His poem “If We Must Die,” published in *Harlem Shadows*, was, as the author said, “an outgrowth of the intense emotional experience I was living through (no doubt with thousands of other Negroes) in those days” (Bloom 140). McKay never mentions that his poem was about race but acknowledges its popularity with African Americans because “to them the poem that voiced the deep-rooted instinct of self-preservation seemed merely a daring piece of impertinence” (141). Through the use of different literary criticisms there can be multiple ways of reading the text; however, McKay was focused on the human struggle but it was African American readers that embraced the poem as their own. There can be multiple ways of reading the poem legitimately but it is Marxist literary

criticism that is the easiest way to come to the author's intent. In fact, McKay did have his African American critics, like William S. Braithwaite, who denounced McKay as a "violent and angry propagandist, using his natural poetic gifts to clothe arrogant and defiant thoughts" (140). The "New Negro," who sympathized with the Marxist ideals of the time, was not only seen as more bold and masculine than the Old South Negro but also more educated, well traveled, and urbanized (Smethurst 53). The New Negro, one who would use violence for change and to counter white people violence as well as benefit from the Harlem Renaissance, is a transformation—not a replacement—of the "Old South Negro"; the New Negro is "both more modern and yet also a return to the cultural wholeness (and virility) of Africa before the fall into slavery" (53). McKay, who had lived in Europe for some years before settling in the United States, fits the New Negro label, one that addresses oppression and class as much as Marxist literary criticism exposes oppression and class.

Claude McKay's Marxist sympathies with socialism did earn him a trip to the Soviet Union in 1923, but he felt he was more sideshow than important member of a like-minded society. Marxism for McKay was about racial equality (Bloom 136). No African Americans participated in the founding of the American Communist Party in 1919 because "the Communist Party had considered the problems of African Americans subordinate to a larger class struggle" (Gardner). Even though McKay was against writing socialist propaganda material (Bloom 140), his poems lend themselves easily to a Marxist Literary Criticism because of his socialist views. While McKay was impatient with racism, his concern with political consequences made McKay "a worker for social change" (NAAL 1006). James Keller, in his article about McKay's protest sonnets, has found McKay's "agenda for social transformation does not involve fundamental change" (456). McKay's own writing expresses that a struggle against the status quo is not monopolized by African Americans; instead, the struggle against the status quo is prioritized by the oppressed. Keller states that McKay, through his writing, exposes America's hypocrisy:

[McKay] indicts America for its failure to live up to its own principles. By pointing out ideological contradictions and by undermining racial stereotypes, he is inviting the power structure to amend social inequities, to develop a consistent and truly equal policy toward all Americans. (456)

By using a Marxist approach, "If We Must Die" can be read as a poem for class struggle and human survival instead of a simple one-sided racial defiance and retaliation poem. Indeed, using

a Marxist approach to McKay's finest poem puts it into context about what message the author intended.

When "If We Must Die" is taught as a message from the Harlem Renaissance, the theme expressed to students, regardless of literary criticism used, should be human struggle, which is the universality McKay was trying to convey. However, as found on *English Education at Saint Xavier University* web site, with a lesson plan for "If We Must Die," in the class discussion of the poem students are asked:

1. Does this poem capture the identity of African Americans in early 20th century? How?
2. If you were an African American at this time, would you be inspired?
3. Do you think you would have a strong sense of identity as an African American after reading this poem?

With these discussion questions, students are guided towards a racial struggle as opposed to a human struggle. Based on the questions posed by the lesson plan from Saint Xavier University, an emotion-based Reader-response literary criticism is used to find meaning in the poem. While the "combination of militancy and introspection was central to the literature of the Renaissance," McKay's poem was not meant to be exclusive to African Americans but a bitter and angry response to the race riots of 1919 that McKay saw as detrimental to establishing equality among the American races (Wintz 71). However, Cary Wintz, in showing that the literature of the Harlem Renaissance was influenced by the political turbulence of the time, states:

The most obvious way that black writers addressed political issues was through political and protest writings. Claude McKay, for example, expressed his anger toward the race riots of 1919 in his sonnet, 'If We Must Die' and urged blacks to meet violence with violence, defying the odds and gaining dignity in their struggle....(190)

If Marxist literary criticism is used to read "If We Must Die," then McKay's intention for the poem will be made clear without falling in the trap of pure emotion and failing to find a more universal meaning and intention of the poem. Churchill did correctly view the poem as a human struggle and a uniting against the status quo, inspiring to die fighting rather than die in passivity. Marxist literary criticism easily exposes the meaning of the poem in part because of McKay's socialist

leanings and in part because of how Marxists generally view literature “not as works created in accordance with timeless artistic criteria, but as ‘products’ of the economic and ideological determinants specific to that era” (Abrams 149). Before “If We Must Die” can be approached using Marxist literary criticism, there must be a common definition of Marxist literary criticism that is easily attainable and understood.

According to Michael Delahoyde, where he sets the groundwork for the approach a critic would take, states that the Marxist literary critic “simply is a careful reader who keeps in mind issues of power and money, and any of the following kinds of questions:

- What role does class play in the work; what is the author’s analysis of class relations?
- How do characters overcome oppression?
- In what ways does the work serve as propaganda for the status quo, or does it try to undermine it?
- What does the work say about oppression; or are social conflicts ignored or blamed elsewhere?
- Does the work propose some form of utopian vision as a solution to the problems encountered in the work?”

A reader keeping in mind issues of power and money helps rule out emotion as the driving force in finding meaning in a text. Based on Delahoyde’s easy-to-follow Marxist literary criticism questions, which combines key points of the criticism, a reader can easily apply Marxist literary criticism to the poem “If We Must Die.” By no means does Delahoyde’s Marxist literary questions water down the literary criticism but instead makes it attainable for the average reader; keeping in mind, however, Delahoyde does use key points of Marxist Literary Criticism from different, established sources to achieve readability and usability of the literary criticism to any text.

The responsibility tied to using a Marxist literary criticism approach to text is important because the Marxist literary criticism approach is just a guide since such “critical literary approaches challenge long-standing assumptions about power, authority, and teachers (or adults)” (Weimer 13). However, Marxist criticism does not form a single body of work. It is a body of works fractured by various points of cultural and political focus, as pointed out by Jonathan Dollimore in his chapter titled “Subjectivity and Social Process” (154-155). The philosophical

ancestry of Marxism included a number of philosophers, like Nietzsche<sup>1</sup> and Jean Rousseau<sup>2</sup>, as well as Machiavelli and Galileo (154). Even Marx declared himself to be ‘not a Marxist’ due to its progression and change of its initial direction. Traditional Marxists, for example, look toward history as their theoretical foundation, seeing the dichotomies that exist in the world as being based on material things (155). It is Delahoyde’s own attainable and usable definition of Marxist literary criticism, that instructors in the literature classroom can use the criticism effectively and without confusing the readers.

The responsibility as a facilitator of learning becomes dangerous for one’s career if it is perceived by parents and administrators that the facilitator in the classroom is breeding revolutionaries. By using a focused approach such as Delahoyde’s Marxist literary questions to the poem, “If We Must Die,” the literary criticism is simply a pair of glasses in which to view and understand the text. Figuratively speaking, having the wrong “pair of glasses” skews the view of the text as seen in Saint Xavier University English Department’s lesson plan for “If We Must Die.” Marxist literary criticism reflects “an author’s own class or analysis of class relations, however piercing or shallow that analysis may be” (Delahoyde). It is obvious that using the Marxist approach with McKay’s poem does in fact expose McKay’s own analysis of race and class relations. With this objective of Marxist literary criticism, readers and students will be able to view texts in a social, political, and economical view that takes them beyond their familiar world (how far depends on the development stage of the readers) and that is why “If We Must Die” is not simply a poem about “Black Struggle” but of human struggle against oppression and against passivity when oppressed.

In order to find this human struggle, McKay’s poem must be viewed using Marxist literary criticism. Deconstructing the poem would more than likely be combining Deconstruction literary criticism with Marxist literary criticism and that is why “If We Must Die” will be approached using just Marxist literary criticism questions as outlined by

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<sup>1</sup> German philosopher who reasoned that Christianity's emphasis on the afterlife makes its believers less able to cope with earthly life. He argued that the ideal human, the *Übermensch*, would be able to channel passions creatively instead of suppressing them. (The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition. 2000 by Houghton Mifflin Company.)

<sup>2</sup> Swiss philosopher and writer who held that the individual is essentially good but usually corrupted by society. (The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition. 2000 by Houghton Mifflin Company.)

Delahoyde. Delahoyde's "Five Marxist Literary Questions" to ask of a text is the best way to have readers and high school students use the Marxist literary criticism.

As part of action research, students (juniors in high school) were given a copy of the Five the Five Marxist Literary Questions and taught what the questions meant and what the questions questions were looking for and used hypothetical examples to understand how to come to correct correct answers (that is, coming to supported conclusions that are not farfetched). In another class, another class, students weren't given the Five Marxist Literary Questions and were asked to read "If We Must Die." In addition, students given the Five Marxist Literary Questions were given the novel *The House of the Scorpion* as a means to practice using the literary criticism. With examples and then a novel to practice using the Marxist literary criticism, students felt comfortable tackling McKay's "If We Must Die" to find its key theme. Without analyzing the poem, students read the poem silently to themselves followed by a non-emotional objective reading of the poem because how the poem is read could influence students' ideas of the theme, so a bland approach had to be taken. Next, the first question of the Five Marxist Literary Questions was asked: "What role does class play in the work; what is the author's analysis of class relations?" The role of the "hog" was instantly recognized as being the lowest class citizens—peasants, working class—that are passive in nature and limited to an area, perhaps a ghetto or poor side of town. Still using the idea of class in the poem, the "dogs" and "monsters" in the poem represent the class in power, or the tools used by those in power. Class does play a role in this poem and is consistent through the poem and this is exposed by the first Marxist Literary Question.

Next, the second question of the Five Marxist Literary Questions asks: "How do characters overcome oppression in the work?" The characters are the hogs, dogs and monsters ("dogs" and "monsters" perceived as one in the same), and the "we." The hogs are the oppressed characters, but they don't overcome oppression and that is why "we" cannot be like them. The dogs and monsters are the cause of the oppression. "We," the author and his audience, will overcome oppression by fighting back, even to the point of dying in the process: "Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack, / Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!" (lines 13-14). With this second of the Five Marxist Literary Questions, students easily see that a proposal is made to overcome oppression and no one character overcomes oppression. The "hogs", according to Charles Heglar in his article, are "... a trope for unreflecting acceptance of the status quo..." With the insinuated passivity of the "hogs," students are able to come to a similar if not exact conclusion

based on Marxist class struggle and the inability (or acceptance) to overcome oppression by the hogs. As for “status quo” (referred to in the poem) this easily leads into the third question of the Five Marxist Literary Questions: “In what ways does the work serve as propaganda for the status quo or does it try to undermine it?”

The third question of the Five Marxist Literary Questions was the easiest to answer for students based on the line “If we must die--let it not be like hogs.” Since the hogs are passive and are “accepting the status quo,” the narrator asks that “we” die with honor by fighting back. The act of fighting back means this poem is trying to undermine the status quo. By undermining the status quo, or at least die trying to undermine it, will bring about an honorable end: “even the monsters we defy / Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!” (lines 7-8). There is even an acknowledgement by those that maintain the status quo that the attempt to change the status quo through fighting to the point of self-sacrifice was honorable.

With the three questions of the Five Marxist Literary Questions answered, students have a better understanding of the poem that is not limited to simply racial identity and strife. Instead, the students have recognized that this poem is about struggle though not limited to one race of people. Thanks to the previous questions, the fourth question is easier to understand but requires deeper thought in answering. It asks: “What does the work say about oppression; or are social conflicts ignored or blamed elsewhere?” Students, using Marxist literary criticism, say that the poem focuses not on passively accepting oppression but to stand up against oppression. Oppression is not something to be taken passively but to be stopped aggressively—or die trying. This idea of “throwing off the yoke of oppression” is consistent with the Marxist idea that the working lower class will overthrow the upper class and establish a more socialized nation which will lead to a utopian society (Delahoyde). The social conflict in the poem is one class being oppressed to the point of destruction by another, seemingly more powerful, class. This social conflict is not ignored in McKay’s poem but directly addressed as seen in the last two lines of the poem: “Like men we’ll face the murderous, cowardly pack,/ Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!” (lines 13-14). Overcoming the oppression is not done alone but as “Kinsmen” who “must meet the common foe” (line 9). Going against the status quo is not race specific and through Marxist Literary Criticism this point is more obvious. As humans



we are kinsmen regardless if a religious or scientific stance is taken with Evolution. As humans we have a basic right of freedom and that freedom cannot be justly contained and oppressed. In Alfred Moss' review of *Claude McKay, Rebel Sojourner in the Harlem Renaissance: A Biography* by Wayne Cooper, Moss finds that "If We Must Die" signaled McKay's "solidarity with American radicals who looked to Communism as the answer to the quest for true freedom" (1132). The socialist view was not limited to the Black Struggle but to all oppressed "common people."

Finally, using the fifth Marxist Literary Question completes the poem and brings with it an overall view of the theme of the poem, which in turn shows how Winston Churchill could understandably use the poem to inspire his people at a time of crisis. The question asks: "Does the work propose some form of utopian vision as a solution to the problems encountered in the work?" The poem does not propose some form of utopian vision but proposes a course of action in those oppressed to rise up against the oppressors. Even if the effort of defying oppression results in death, it will be a death of action (i.e. go down fighting) instead of inaction (i.e. rollover and die; passivity). The "utopia" can be reached if these "dogs" are defeated or, in dying with honor, utopia can be achieved in the afterlife. The goal is not to die but in fighting against the oppressors, if death is to occur, then one should do so fighting to the death.

Obviously those "hogs" and "We" are not restricted to just African Americans but actually reflect the reader as he or she tries to make sense of this poem about oppression and the attitude of passivity toward that oppression. Students not using the Marxist criticism during the action research focused on racial inequalities between American whites and blacks much like the Xavier University lesson plan led their students toward thinking of racial inequality. In contrast, the students utilizing the Marxist literary criticism during the action research did not make a racial connection with the meaning of the poem. Instead, a defiant stand against oppression rose to the surface by reading the poem using a literary criticism that allows the reader to find the more supported theme in the poem. As a result, Winston Churchill was correctly reading the poem in order to inspire fellow Britons during The Blitz. This poem, therefore, can be used as a means to show how oppression by the status quo cannot be taken passively or ignored, and the answer is to fight back—even to the death.

Marxist literary criticism is a tool that should be used on text that lends itself to class conflict. Mary Lou Brandvik recommends that students be provided with a variety of ways to analyze text, emphasizing that none of the methods to approach a text is the correct manner by

which the material is studied. This process permits the teacher to offer a variety of perspectives to the student and permits the student to become more involved in finding his or her own understanding of what the text *means* (156). Having a cooperative approach to a literary text appears to work well with the realities of teaching Marxist literary criticism. The group reading experience, combined with group criticism, helps the students tackle what may be a difficult piece of literature for them to access on their own. As seen using the five Marxist Literary Questions, a text that lends itself to the criticism arms the reader with the ability to understand the meaning of a text.

How to create a lesson on Claude McKay's "If We Must Die" should be obvious: Delahoyde's Five Marxist Literary Questions, a practice text that lends itself to Marxist literary criticism, background information on McKay, a cooperative setting, and an open mind. While McKay does not get as much coverage on C-Span's "American Writers II" series, or much coverage in teaching about the Harlem Renaissance, McKay can be taught correctly if there is an adventurous reader or a fearless teacher willing to use Marxist literary criticism to bring to light McKay's outspoken thoughts on social issues.

The poem "If We Must Die" is an important poem to have in any classroom where the Harlem Renaissance or Modernism is studied even if Langston Hughes dominates many of those discussions. However, the poem "If We Must Die" needs not be misunderstood as a simple black struggle protest poem. Instead, with the correct pair of glasses (literary criticism) to interpret the theme of the poem, readers can fully understand that we, as humans, should not and will not passively accept oppression in any shape or form. Proof of this was seen by Winston Churchill's reading of "If We Must Die" as a means to inspire. Marxist Literary Criticism is easy to learn and apply as seen with Delahoyde's literary Marxist questions. Therefore, other Protest poems, and texts that lend themselves to Marxist criticism, can be read and interpreted correctly instead of only relying on reactionary feelings. Claude McKay's "If We Must Die" should be read in the classroom but it must be done using the proper tools to find and understand the meaning of the poem.

**Biography**

Liberty A. Usera has worked for KCKCC since the Fall 2012, teaching Composition I and II. Having taught middle school and high school English composition for eleven years, it was a natural step to the post-secondary level once he earned his MA in English. While one of his goals has always been to meet standards set by the State of Kansas Board of Regents and KCKCC, his primary focus has always been to have students take ownership of their learning and to have them succeed as a result. Usera's favorite quote is the basis of his approach to teaching: "You get what you put into it." Having followed the best practices researched by Robert Marzano, Usera has always favored a cooperative, student-centered classroom. Currently, Usera is working on more research that promotes making literary analysis easy for any reader because he believes text analysis hones critical thinking skills, and he continues to promote better writing skills for all students because of the importance of writing in college and beyond.

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