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Good morning Brisbane State Library Poetry Festival and thank you for having me. Today I’ll be talking about “If we must die” by Claude McKay. It is a conventional rhyming narrative driven poem written in 1919 about Claude’s social and political concerns as an Afro-Caribbean man in the United States and his duty to resist political oppression and tyranny.

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It portrays many aspects and messages that are still relevant to today’s socio-political climate by painting a picture of the perspective of one of the people rebelling against the oppression. It does so though the use of poetic language devices such as colourful visual features, descriptive sound devices and theme & atmosphere.

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This poem uses a vast array of visual devices, namely metaphors, similes and descriptive language, to reinforce the ideas and message of the poem. It is only though the use of these descriptive visual devices that the Author can effectively spread the message. The Author has used metaphors such as “while round us bark the mad and hungry dogs” to create a relatable description of the oppressor which can easily be spread.

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The “mad and hungry dogs” represent the tyrants and oppressors that oppose the rebellious message of the song. They are “mad” because of their irrational hatred and discrimination of African-Americans and coloured people and “hungry” because of their greed and willingness to destroy the movement for personal or economic reasons. The description of the tyrants supports the message of the poem and allows it to be used in political rebellions against oppression even today.

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The only simile in the poem is “if we must die—let it not be like hogs “. It helps create a deeper understanding of the poet’s thoughts and desires by comparing a unhonourable to death to a hog’s death, an idea we will all understand and relate to in detail.

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The use of these descriptive and relatable language features creates a deeper understanding of the message, it allows the ideas and perspectives to be easily spread to others and it provides information on the issues relevant to today’s society. Visual and textual features such as metaphors, similes and descriptive language create an inspirational and memorable poem. Similarly, the Author has used sound devices to spread the message among oppressed people and the audience.

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The poem uses sound devices such as, rhyming, repetition and syllable use to create flow and rhythm which enhances its narrative storytelling. The poet uses equally distributed rhymes to make a rhythmic flow throughout the poem, thus making the poem more remarkable.

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The repetition of “if we must die” highlights the message and makes it more memorable by creating a catchy and powerful slogan which will become stuck in the reader’s heads reminding them of the message the poem is trying to spread.

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Finally, the Author uses similar levels of syllable use throughout the poem. Each line has between 9-11 syllables which creates a familiar flow throughout the poem allowing for an unforgettable and impactful narrative which will cause many to sympathize with the cause.

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Through the use of these sound devices, rhyming, repetition and syllable use, the poet has created a musical and rhythmic poem which gets stuck in the reader’s head, emphasizing the message and helping the audience to understand the social and political injustices that are present in today’s society. However, the poem is not made entirely of sound devices and atmosphere & theme are essential to creating the narrative.

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The atmosphere & theme that this poem is centred around is oppression and how it has created a grim and unfair life for those affected. This is communicated though the poem’s theme, which is grim yet rebellious. A quote which this theme is present in is “If we must die, O let us nobly die”.

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It highlights the theme of this poem while establishing a foundation on which the perspective of an oppressed person is built for the audience to see though. This perspective allows the reader to understand the issues that people like Claude are facing and it brings them a greater understanding of the political and social situation, which is ultimately why poems are relevant to society.

13

An example of descriptive language used to create the grim, inspiration and powerful atmosphere that is displayed in the poem is “So that our precious blood may not be shed in vain”. The poet used words like “precious blood” and “shed in vain” to create an atmosphere of inspiration and dread.

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It is through this use of atmosphere & theme that the audience understands the perspective of an oppressed person & the issues relevant to society. It makes them feel sympathetic towards their cause. This effectively spreads and cultivates the ideas amongst a large audience and it substantially aids in the turning of the wheel of progress towards the future which Claude McKay envisioned.

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The poem displays an important message effectively though the use of visual devices, sound devices and theme & atmosphere. It displays the social and political concerns of the poet as an Afro-Caribbean man in the united states and his sense of duty to progress society towards a more equal tomorrow. Ultimately, the poem was written to inform and inspire others so that they can resist the political oppression they may face.

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He successfully did so as this poem inspired a multitude of major movements across countries with political oppression. It is obvious because of these movements that this poem was relevant to the social problems and society at the time.

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However, it is still relevant to today’s socio-political climate as it is being used as an icon in major political rebellions in countries with oppression across the world. This poem is about rising up against your political oppressors, violently and bravely, and even if you die you will be remembered as a hero, a better fate than an oppressive life.