Name: _____ Class: _____

We Wear the Mask

By Paul Laurence Dunbar
1896

Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906) was one of the first African American authors to reach a national and international audience. Best known as a poet, Dunbar published his first poems at age 16. ***Skill Focus:*** *In this lesson, you'll practice analyzing an author's use of figurative language. This means paying attention to similes and metaphors. As you read, take note of the comparisons and the message they reveal.*

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes, —
This debt[1] we pay to human guile;[2]
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties.[3]

Why should the world be over-wise,
In counting all our tears and sighs?
Nay, let them only see us, while
We wear the mask.

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries
To thee from tortured souls arise.
We sing, but oh the clay is vile[4]
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
But let the world dream otherwise,
We wear the mask!



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1. Here, having a debt to pay means having an obligation, or something one must do.
2. **Guile** ***(noun):*** clever but sometimes dishonest behavior that one uses to deceive others
3. "Mouth with myriad subtleties" may refer to the many expectations for "respectful" speech, such as calling someone sir or ma'am.
4. **Vile** ***(adjective):*** extremely unpleasant; wicked or immoral

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. Which of the following best describes a central theme of the text?
    A. Identity comes from what we do and are, not what we look like.
    B. Social pressure can turn independent people into just faces in a crowd.
    C. Being sad and upset by tragedy is okay, and people should not hide it away.
    D. Silence allows people to stay strong in difficult situations, even though it does have consequences.

2. Which of the following quotes best supports the idea of why people wear masks?
    A. “This debt we pay to human guile” (Line 3)
    B. “Why should the world be over-wise, / In counting all our tears and sighs?” (Lines 6-7)
    C. “O great Christ, our cries / To thee from tortured souls arise.” (Lines 10-11)
    D. “We sing, but oh the clay is vile / Beneath our feet, and long the mile” (Lines 12-13)

3. Why must the people (the “we” mentioned) wear the mask?
    A. The people wear the mask to protect their faces and themselves.
    B. The people wear the mask because they are told to by the larger society.
    C. The people wear the mask to keep their identities a secret.
    D. The people wear the mask to hide their suffering.

4. The speaker says, “We sing, but oh, the clay is vile / Beneath our feet, and long the mile.” (Lines 12-13) What is the most likely interpretation of these lines?
    A. The people dislike the journey, so they sing a happy song to make themselves feel better.
    B. The people’s lives are difficult, but they pretend to feel joy when others can see.
    C. The people are on a gross and muddy road, but they still enjoy traveling together.
    D. The people have to travel a very long way, and the song helps them pass the time.

5. How does the poet use figurative language to develop the theme in “We Wear the Mask”?

Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. Based on what you know about Paul Laurence Dunbar and the status of black Americans in the early twentieth century, why does the speaker feel the need to wear a mask?

2. Think of other situations where people might wear masks (not literal masks).Do you think a person should hide their emotions? Why or why not?

3. In the context of this poem, how do people overcome adversity? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.

4. Does the speaker seem genuine when he recommends wearing “the mask?” Consider when the poem was written and the tone the speaker uses.