

Name: _____ Class: _____

We Wear the Mask

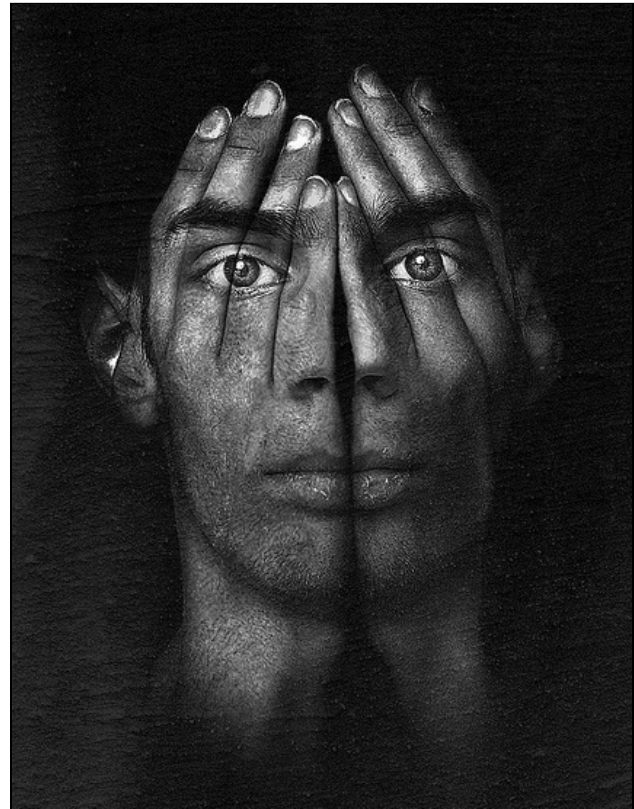
By Paul Laurence Dunbar
1896

Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906) was an influential African American poet during the early twentieth century. He was the son of freed slaves and a friend of Frederick Douglass. Critics have said that “[h]e was the first to rise to a height from which he could take a perspective view of his own race. He was the first to see objectively its humor, its superstitions, its short-comings; the first to feel sympathetically its heart-wounds, its yearnings, its aspirations, and to voice them all in a purely literary form.” As you read the poem, take notes on Dunbar’s use of figurative language and diction, and what these devices reveal about the poem’s theme.

- [1] We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes, —
This debt we pay to human guile;¹
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
[5] And mouth with myriad² 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.

- [10] We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries
To thee from tortured souls arise.
We sing, but oh the clay is vile⁴
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
But let the world dream otherwise,
[15] We wear the mask!



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1. **Guile** (*noun*): sly or cunning intelligence; the use of clever and usually dishonest methods to achieve something
2. **Myriad** (*adjective*): countless
3. **Subtleties** (*noun*): small details or differences that are important but not obvious
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. PART A: 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. Resilience comes in many forms, such as silence, though this silence does have consequences.
 - C. Tragedy should be openly mourned and not hidden away.
 - D. Social Pressure can turn independent people into just faces in a crowd.

2. PART B: Which of the following quotes best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "We wear the mask that grins and lies, / It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes" (Lines 1-2)
 - B. "This debt we pay to human guile" (Line 3)
 - 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. In the final stanza, what does the setting of the "long... mile" contribute to the message of the poem?
 - A. The setting of a "long... mile" suggests that the masked people feel lost and cannot figure out which way to go, thus contributing to the message of identity.
 - B. The figurative setting suggests that the masked people have been on a long 'journey' (or mile) facing many challenges but still have farther to travel, thus contributing to the message of resilience.
 - C. The setting of the "long... mile" is paved with "vile" clay, implying that hiding one's feelings is wrong and thus adding to the message of honesty.
 - D. The setting is paved with "vile" clay, implying that the masked people hate the world for making them walk such a "long... mile" and thus adding to the message's demand for change.

5. Does the speaker seem genuine when he recommends wearing 'the mask'? Consider when the poem was written and the tone the speaker uses. Cite evidence from the text to support your answer.
