

What's Behind the Mask?

PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR'S GREAT POEM ABOUT RACIAL INJUSTICE, UNZIPPED SO YOU CAN SEE WHAT'S INSIDE.

To unzip poetry:

>>TO REVEAL THE TRUTH OF A POEM

>>TO ANALYZE A POEM'S MEANING

>>TO CLARIFY THE FORM BEHIND THE WORDS



MICHAEL WEJCHERT UNZIPS "WE WEAR THE MASK"

In a world with so many injustices, it is perhaps fitting that the ones in "We Wear the Mask" by Paul Laurence Dunbar are ambiguous. With deeply affecting pronouns, biting diction, and ironic verbs, he creates a poem that allows the reader's interpretation to vary and their views to be voiced through the poem. By using "we," the poet establishes a collective voice, which places part of the emotional burden on the reader. Although one might assume that the poem's speaker is its author, this is not necessarily true. The title phrase, "We wear the mask that grins and lies," applies to any human who has ever hidden pain and suffering, and allows them to rally with the speaker.



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AGE: 17

We Wear the Mask

by Paul Laurence Dunbar

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

Why should the world be otherwise,
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
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
But let the world dream otherwise,
We wear the mask!

NANA-ABA NDUOM UNZIPS “WE WEAR THE MASK”

The best poetry resounds with even the most uninformed of readers—those who claim not to understand poetry, and those who know nothing about the origins of a poem. “We Wear the Mask” does not require heavy analysis to be enjoyed. At the same time, the poem and its writer are of a high quality. Wrapped in an easy-to-read package of a simple rhyme scheme and a nearly constant syllable count, the poem delivers its message with vivid imagery and diction. The uniform rhythm of the poem, broken only by the repetition of “we wear the mask,” mirrors the drive to conformity to which this very line alludes. With powerful descriptions

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like “torn and bleeding hearts” and “tortured souls,” the poem firmly establishes the complete physical and spiritual pain that motivates it and its speaker. While few readers can really empathize with such

deeply rooted pain, many can understand the desire to hide because one is misunderstood or to “let the world dream otherwise.” Putting these sentiments in the context of slavery makes the poem’s message resound even more deeply.



Unzipped: Your Turn

>>WHAT DOES “THE MASK” SYMBOLIZE TO YOU?

>>WHY DOES THE SPEAKER SAY, “LET THEM ONLY SEE US, WHILE WE WEAR THE MASK”?

>>HOW DO YOU INTERPRET THE PHRASE, “MOUTH WITH MYRIAD SUBTLETIES”?

>>WHAT IS THE EFFECT OF THE REPETITION IN THE LAST LINE?

ABOUT PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR

BORN

June 27, 1872,
Dayton, Ohio

DIED

February 6, 1906
Dayton, Ohio

EDUCATION

Dunbar, the son of ex-slaves, was the only black student in his Dayton, Ohio, high school.

FIRST FAMOUS MOMENT

At age 17, Dunbar published his own newspaper, the *Dayton Tattler*, an African-American newspaper printed by his friend and high school classmate Orville Wright.



SEND US the title and author of your favorite poem, and tell us why you love it. What is it about the poem that speaks to you? What’s your favorite image? How does it relate to you and your life? Send your response to LC@Scholastic.com.

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