

# We Wear the Mask



## POEM TEXT

- 1 We wear the mask that grins and lies,
- 2 It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—
- 3 This debt we pay to human guile;
- 4 With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
- 5 And mouth with myriad subtleties.
  
- 6 Why should the world be over-wise,
- 7 In counting all our tears and sighs?
- 8 Nay, let them only see us, while
- 9     We wear the mask.
  
- 10 We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries
- 11 To thee from tortured souls arise.
- 12 We sing, but oh the clay is vile
- 13 Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
- 14 But let the world dream otherwise,
- 15     We wear the mask!



## THEMES



### OPPRESSION, RACISM, AND IDENTITY

"We Wear the Mask" speaks to the experience of being a member of an oppressed group. The speaker is part of a community of people who must constantly "mask" their true feelings while presenting a happy face to the world. As a result, these people effectively have two identities: a true self, hidden behind the mask, and the self they present to simply get by in a prejudiced society.

Although race isn't mentioned in this poem, it is essential to its meaning: most of Dunbar's work engaged with race in some way, and this mask [metaphor](#) extends itself to the specific experience of being black in America at the end of the 19th century—a time when black people often had to hide their suffering in order to survive in an unjust and unsympathetic society. That said, the poem can also be taken as an account of the pain and frustration of being forced to endure societal oppression and prejudice more generally.

While most people can probably relate to the idea of having to mask their emotions at certain times in life, the poem doesn't necessarily speak to the individual so much as it attempts to describe the feelings of an entire group of people. The poem begins with the speaker repeating the title, insisting that "We wear the mask that grins and lies." The mask does not grin or lie, but grins *and* lies simultaneously, demonstrating to the reader that the smile of the mask is never genuine. Indeed, the speaker confirms that there is deep suffering behind this presentation of joy, telling the reader that their hearts are "torn and bleeding" and their "souls" are "tortured."

Adding to the poem's power is the fact that, in much of the poetry and literature that depicts African Americans, there is a [trope](#) of the "happy slave"—an enslaved person who is perfectly content with their circumstances. This trope was used as a justification for slavery: if enslaved people are treated well by their masters and can experience happiness, the thinking went, then slavery couldn't be all that bad.

This poem seeks to undo this stereotype and expose it as being nothing but a performance for survival. Indeed, the speaker references their own anguish throughout the entirety of the poem, most often pairing it with the image of the mask. "We smile, but," the speaker states, demonstrating to the reader that, regardless of their appearance or how genuine it seems, behind it is a constant state of agony. Part of the pain of oppression, the poem ultimately argues, is not just being forced to *hide* the truth, but having to *perform* a lie.



## SUMMARY

We all wear a mask that makes it look like we're happy, but this is a lie. The mask covers our cheeks and casts a shadow over our eyes. This mask is the price we pay for the fact that people are capable of such deceit. We smile despite feeling as though our hearts have been broken and battered, and we make thousands of careful little tweaks as we speak to others so as not to reveal our true selves.

What use it would be for the rest of society to pay close attention to all the details of our suffering? No, society will only see us while our faces are hidden behind the mask.

But even as we smile, on the inside we're crying out to God from the depths of our tortured souls. We sing, but the mud we must walk through is disgusting, and the mile through which we must walk feels so long. Despite all this, let the rest of society pretend that we're not suffering. Meanwhile, we'll keep wearing the mask!

**Where this theme appears in the poem:**

- Line 1
- Lines 2-15
- Lines 4-5
- Line 7
- Lines 10-13

**EMPOWERMENT AND RESILIENCE**

Throughout "We Wear the Mask," the speaker describes deep and prolonged suffering. The group in this poem have "torn and bleeding hearts," express "tears and sighs," and are "tortured souls" who must constantly pretend they are not struggling. However, there is also a sense of resilience running through the poem. Wearing this "mask" is a constant reminder of their oppression, but it also, in a way, binds this group together—creating a sense of camaraderie and shared strength that helps them endure such pain.

The phrase "We Wear the Mask" is both the title of the poem and its [refrain](#). The repetition of the phrase throughout the poem illustrates that it has become a sort of mantra to this group. In the conclusion of the poem, the phrase even becomes an exclamation—"We wear the mask!"—thus giving the final line a sense of enthusiasm, and perhaps even a sense of pride.

Also note how, in line 5, the speaker almost boastfully explains that this group can "mouth with myriad subtleties." This line suggests to the reader that members of this group hold a level of expertise in their form of deceit. Though they certainly don't *enjoy* their circumstances, they do seem able to feel pride and a sense of accomplishment when they perform their craft well.

Later, the speaker remarks that "we sing" even though "the clay is vile / Beneath our feet" and the miles they must walk in it are "long," indicating that, while the journey is difficult, they can and will continue to endure it with a brave face. This demonstrates that the group is strong, both in spite of their suffering and because of it.

This is also language in this poem that suggests that the mask is a choice (though this choice could be an illusion). The speaker says, with an arguable air of triumph, "let them only see us while / We wear the mask," and "let the world dream otherwise, / We wear the mask!"

Seeing as the speaker is oppressed, it is unlikely that the mask is *truly* optional—at least, not without facing further consequences for removing it. To take off the mask could potentially mean not being able to survive in a society that seeks to oppress the speaker. However, the group can feel empowered from choosing to go on as opposed to giving up. Thus, the speaker and their group can find confidence as they continue to use the mask and survive their ordeal.

In lines 6 and 7, the speaker poses a [rhetorical question](#): "Why

should the world be over-wise / In counting all our tears and sighs?" While this question suggests that "the world" the speaker refers to would be unsympathetic to their plight, it also offers that, perhaps, the world does not *deserve* to know the anguish of the speaker. As a marginalized people, it may benefit them to shield their suffering from their oppressors, as it denies the oppressor the opportunity to enjoy (or at least know the true extent of) the power they hold. This, in turn, can shift the sense of control the group has, and give them a sense of strength and unity.

**Where this theme appears in the poem:**

- Line 5
- Lines 6-9
- Lines 12-15

**LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS****LINES 1-2**

*We wear the mask that grins and lies,  
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—*

The first line repeats the poem's title and introduces its [extended metaphor](#). The mask, which represents the false emotions a person might "wear" in front of other people, both smiles and lies—which indicates that the outward appearance of the mask does not match the true emotions that are beneath it. In other words, the people who wear this mask *aren't* smiling, and *aren't* happy. While readers don't know exactly who these people are, it's already clear that they must for some reason hide what they're thinking and feeling from the rest of the world. The phrase "We wear the mask" will also repeat two more times in the poem as a [refrain](#), never letting the reader forget the burden this group carries.

The first line also introduces the speaker, who uses the pronoun "we" throughout. The speaker is not necessarily an individual, then, but rather a representative of a larger group. Though subjective, readers could even potentially include themselves as being a member of this "we"—and maybe empathize with the struggles of the community being described.

The second line continues to describe the mask as covering the entirety of the speaker's face, demonstrating that the mask fully obscures any features which could give away the speaker's true emotions. In particular, note how the mask casts a shadow over the eyes of those who wear it. Eyes are often used in poetry (and literature in general) to represent a person's truest self—think of the phrase "eyes are the window to the soul." The fact that this mask "shades" its wearers' eyes emphasizes how much the wearers must hide not just what they're *feeling*, but who they *are*.

These lines also introduce the poem's meter, which is a pretty steady [iambic tetrameter](#)—meaning most lines have four stressed and four unstressed syllables in the following alternating pattern:

We wear the mask that grins and lies,  
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—

lambos mimic the way people tend to speak in regular English, lending the poem a casual, colloquial feel. The focus here isn't on fancy or overly poetic language, but rather on conveying a clear message to the reader—something the poem's straightforward meter reflects.

Readers will also note the clear, [perfect rhymes](#) between lines 1 and 2 ("lies" and "eyes"), which mark the beginning of the poem's Rondeau rhyme scheme (something we'll talk about more in "Rhyme Scheme"). What's important to know here is that these AA rhymes will repeat in every stanza of the poem going forward, creating a sonic echo and sense of consistency that ties the poem together.

### LINE 3

*This debt we pay to human guile;*

In the third line, the speaker describes wearing the mask as a "debt" this group must pay to "human guile." Guile means deception or craftiness; it's a bit of a confusing statement, but the speaker is essentially saying that wearing the mask is the price this group pays for having been given the ability to deceive others. The important thing here is that this line indicates the mask is not as optional as it seems, but rather, something that *must* be worn in order for this debt to be repaid.

This line also implies that, if it is indeed being worn to repay a debt to humanity, the use of the mask is a lifelong endeavor rather than one to be worn for only a certain amount of time. The terms of the debt are not mentioned, but the line suggests that if the wearing of the mask is owed to all of humankind, then it is unlikely that this debt is ever meant to end.

This line creates a new understanding of the mask for the reader, in that the mask is likely not something that is worn for pleasure. While there are some people who may enjoy deceiving others, the speaker is not hiding their true self from others for the sake of it. Rather, it appears to be something that *must* be done.

### LINES 4-5

*With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,  
And mouth with myriad subtleties.*

In lines 4 and 5, the speaker begins to more plainly state their feelings and to demonstrate how they specifically use this [metaphorical](#) mask.

The first line implies that the speaker is not as happy as they

pretend to be, but the specific emotions the speaker is hiding are not yet revealed—the speaker might be angry, annoyed, or bored. However, line 4 reveals that the speaker is actually in despair.

While the speaker mentions having a broken heart, the language used to describe this feeling suggest that the heart does not suffer from a romantic loss. Instead, this group's hearts are "torn" and "bleeding"—a more visceral, violent image that evokes a more profound state of suffering. This, in turn, changes the way in which the reader understands the mask. In the first three lines, it may appear as though the speaker is a trickster or a con artist, wearing a mask to cause trouble. However, upon the revelation that the speaker is actually suffering, the fourth line promotes empathy in the reader.

The speaker also mentions, in line 5, that they speak with "myriad subtleties" to others—implying that the speaker engages with others in a way that is heavily coded and hard to pick up on without a keen ear. This is reflected in the [alliteration](#) of "mouth" and "myriad," the strongest in the poem thus far (the other example being the subtler "We wear" in line 1).

This is also the first circumstance in which the speaker is actively participating in deception: the act of wearing a mask is somewhat passive, in the sense that the mask does most of the work after the wearer dons it. However, this moment demonstrates that the changing of one's face is not the only way in which the speaker "performs" for the rest of society.

Line 6 is also significant, as it is the first and only instance of [slant rhyme](#) within the poem. While the majority of the poem is in [iambic tetrameter](#) with near-perfect rhyming couplets, the sixth line's "subtleties" does not rhyme nearly as neatly with "lies" or "eyes." This moment of slant rhyme undermines the reader's expectations while simultaneously upholding the poem's thematic aims, reflecting, on a form level, that things are not quite as they seem.

### LINES 6-7

*Why should the world be over-wise,  
In counting all our tears and sighs?*

Lines 6 and 7 introduce a new stanza and present a [rhetorical question](#): the speaker essentially asks the reader, "Why should the world pay attention to us and our suffering?" This question reveals who the speaker is performing for, which in turn enhances the reader's understanding why the mask is being used.

The speaker reveals that they wear the mask to fool the world, i.e., society. In understanding who the speaker is performing for, the reader can begin to understand (if they have not already, given the historical context and race of the author) that this poem is concerned with the experiences and the treatment of marginalized people. This also lends itself to understanding of why the mask is being used in the first place. Yes, the mask is

meant to hide suffering, but to what end and for what purpose? If the mask is being used to deceive society and is being used by a marginalized person, it could suggest to the reader that the mask is a tool of survival, rather than a tool of amusement or even convenience. The line suggests as much in its question, demonstrating that, if the world *were* to be aware of the suffering of the speaker, it would not care.

What's more, perhaps the speaker believes that, since the world is at fault for the speaker's suffering, the world is not to be trusted with the truth. The speaker could thus also use the mask as a way of obtaining some sort of control: if the speaker does not reveal the extent of this anguish, then the world is also not able to find any pleasure in it. In other words, the speaker is saying that this prejudiced society—which fails to treat the speaker with respect and dignity—will not get the opportunity to see (and maybe even enjoy) the speaker's pain.

Like most of the poem, lines 6 and 7 are [end-stopped](#), which continues to uphold the rhythm of the poem while also continuing to convey the rigidity the speaker must subject themselves to, as they maintain a strict hold over their mask. While the end-stopped line 7 is, perhaps, a choice made mostly to maintain the conventions of Standard English and illustrate that a question is being asked, the comma that end-stops line 6 allows the reader a moment of pause. This end-stop essentially halves single rhetorical question in two, offering the reader the opportunity to ponder about the notion of what the world *should* know.

Line 6 contains an instance of [consonance](#), with the words "why," "world," and "-wise" cutting to the central point of the question asked: *why* [should the] *world* [be] *wise*? This linking of consonant sounds suggests that the world, at large, is considered unwise by the speaker.

## LINES 8-9

*Nay, let them only see us, while  
We wear the mask.*

The second stanza ends with the speaker responding to their own [rhetorical question](#) by telling the reader to not even consider the possibilities of the answer—the speaker asserts it is always better for the world to see the speaker *only* when the speaker is wearing the mask.

Lines 8 and 9 are significant in that they change the reader's understanding of choice. Initially, the speaker implied that the mask was a lifelong sentence, a debt to be paid. However, the speaker alters this implication by introducing the notion that, whether or not the mask is optional, the speaker would choose the mask regardless.

If the reader understands the poem as speaking to the experience of an oppressed people, then the reader could assume that this choice is, in reality, nothing but an illusion, created to comfort the speaker. Generally speaking, a group of

people would not choose to suffer from discrimination if given the option. However, these lines signal a shift in the speaker's attitude.

Sharing a secret, regardless of the context, is an exchange of privileged information. If a person decides to tell their friend a secret about themselves, then that person has determined the friend is trustworthy. In "We Wear the Mask," the speaker has made a judgment call regarding the trustworthiness of society at large, deciding that the speaker should never allow vulnerability in front of society. The speaker has actively deemed society as unworthy of the speaker's true self, which indicates that the speaker has established some level of superiority over the world, even if only from a moral standpoint.

Between lines 8 and 9 is the poem's first use of [enjambment](#), with the word "while" leading into the first iteration of the [refrain](#), "We wear the mask." This enjambment occurs when the speaker has adopted a defiant tone, suggesting that the speaker is instead choosing to wear the mask and prevent society from seeing their true self, rather than being forced into wearing the mask. The use of enjambment here suggests to the reader that the speaker's attitude is beginning to shift from the first stanza, in which every line is [end-stopped](#). Those end-stopped lines initially reflected the mask's inflexibility, suggesting the notion of a never-ending performance. Here, the rigorous performance of the end-stopped line ceases—if only for a moment,

Line 9 also introduces the refrain of the poem. This refrain, which is of course also the title of the poem and the first four words of line 1, presents the phrase "We wear the mask" as a sort of mantra by which these people must live in order to survive. This introduces the mask as being almost a point of pride, an idea that continues to develop in the final stanza.

## LINES 10-11

*We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries  
To thee from tortured souls arise.*

In lines 10 and 11, the speaker reiterates the *depth* of the speaker's pain behind the mask, while continuing to demonstrate the extent to which the speaker *conceals* that pain.

In line 10, the speaker references the only other entity in the poem besides the speaker and the world: God. In this line, the speaker directly addresses God via [apostrophe](#), saying that this group's cries of pain call out to Christ from the depths of their "tortured souls." This call is silent—the speaker is still smiling on the outside—and should be understood as an emotional internal prayer; God is meant to be the only recipient of this message.

Line 10 also has a significant [caesura](#), in which the word "but" is offset by two commas. This caesura is meant to illuminate the contrast between the clause that precedes it and the clause

that follows: the speaker smiles—but they also cry out to God with their suffering. This again demonstrates the extent to which the speaker suffers behind the mask, yet still *performs* contentment.

Between lines 10 and 11 is the second instance of [enjambment](#) in the poem, with the word "cries" leading into "To thee." This use of enjambment continues to perpetuate the extreme sense of despair present in stanza 3, with the cries of the speaker so intense that they must flow over the end of their own line and into the next. To the reader, the "mask" that the poem itself wears—it's strict form, with its regular rhyme scheme and meter—slips a little, revealing the depths of the speaker's pain for just a moment.

Line 11 then reiterates the extent of the speaker's emotional pain, describing the speaker's soul as "tortured." This reminds the reader, after being presented with the notion of choice in the previous stanza, that the speaker is trapped in a prolonged state of suffering. Line 11, unlike the line previous, is then [end-stopped](#), illustrating that the speaker has composed themselves once more, and by extension, must always return to the mask.

### LINES 12-13

*We sing, but oh the clay is vile  
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;*

The speaker continues to describe their pain in lines 12 and 13, and to establish the idea of emotional endurance and resilience. The speaker states that while they "sing," the "clay" beneath their feet is "vile," and they must walk for a long time through it. The clay can perhaps be taken as a sort of [metonym](#)—a stand-in for the earth itself, or the world that surrounds the speaker. This world is "vile," meaning it is horrible or wicked. The speaker is saying that simply trying to exist in an unjust society every day is deeply taxing.

The word also suggests physical labor, evoking imagery associated with the institution of slavery in the United States. As previously mentioned, the themes of this poem, while speaking generally to the experience of any marginalized group of people, are intertwined with the specific experience of black people in the U.S. following the end of the Civil War. Here, the mentions of clay and having to walk long distances through it brings to mind the back-breaking labor and poor conditions of the enslaved. Singing might also be an [allusion](#) to "spirituals," an oral deeply rooted in the slave trade.

At the same time, this walk through clay can be understood as a walk through a more [metaphorical](#), emotional landscape. Although the suffering mentioned is described as being internal, its effects on the speaker's spirit are just as intense as those of physical labor. The speaker labors under the weight of their private suffering, with no end in sight.

The final instance of [enjambment](#) in the poem occurs between lines 12 and 13. This suggests to the reader that the clay

mentioned is so vile that the level of disgust the speaker has for it cannot be contained by the line; the speaker is so disgusted that the poem's strictly-controlled form once again cracks a bit.

### LINES 14-15

*But let the world dream otherwise,  
We wear the mask!*

In line 14, the speaker mentions "the world" once more, immediately after having compared their own emotional endurance to an intense and endless physical journey. Here, the speaker once again denies the world a chance to see the speaker's struggle, doubling down on their mistrust of the rest of society. The poem then ends how it began, with the final instance of the [refrain](#): "We wear the mask!"

The exclamation point used here is important. Despite the speaker's insistence on the depth of their suffering, the speaker seems to have found a sense of empowerment in their use of the mask. Indeed, back in line 13, the speaker explains that their use of the mask is not ending anytime soon, describing the "mile" they must walk as "long." When the speaker then declares that, regardless, the world will continue to believe in the speaker's contentment, the reader can assume that the speaker has no intention of giving up: the speaker will continue to endure this struggle, and will continue to use the mask to survive.

Because of the enthusiasm of the final [end-stopped](#) line, readers are again reminded of the mask's flexible sense of meaning. Instead of being symbolic *only* of the speaker's oppression, the mask is *also* symbolic of the speaker's ability to continue on. Overall, it is clear that the mask is a complex and layered [metaphor](#) for the experience of oppression. The mask may not be entirely optional in the eyes of the speaker (at least, not without facing dangerous consequences), but the poem suggests that an oppressed people may find a way to celebrate small victories in order to better cope with their reality.

The speaker cannot control their circumstances or the cause of their pain, but the speaker can still maintain control over their own sense of self and establish their own emotional boundaries. While the vigilance it takes to shield one's inner thoughts and feelings may be exhausting, this also illustrates that the speaker has a sense of self-worth. The speaker values their true self, and thus protects it from those whom the speaker deems unworthy. As such, the mask also represents the speaker's emotional resilience and endurance: so long as the speaker uses the mask, the speaker survives.



## SYMBOLS



## THE MASK

The poem uses the mask to, not surprisingly, symbolize deception: it is a tool that this marginalized group uses to trick the rest of society into thinking that they're happy and complacent.

The mask also highlights the dual-nature of this deception: the mask both *hides* the true face of its wearer while also *presenting* a false identity to the world. Notice how the mask mentioned in the first line both grins and lies, illustrating that it must conceal *and* be seen. In other words, while the mask hides the face, it also allows its wearer to *control* how others perceive them.

In this particular poem, the mask is a tool used by the black community to endure suffering under white supremacy. The mask, then, is not simply a tool for deception, but also for survival. While many black citizens protested their treatment under white supremacy, the consequences for doing so could be severe, even fatal. Thus, many black people had to adopt the "mask"—to hide their true feelings—in order to live under the contemptuous eye of white society without causing any need for further scrutiny.

This tool speaks to American activist and author [W.E.B. Du Bois's idea of "double consciousness,"](#) which sees the oppressed person as having a split sense of self: a public and private identity, one of which conforms to the society that oppresses it, and the other of which rejects it.

The symbolic resonance of the mask also changes throughout the poem. In the first stanza, the mask is clearly a burden to those who must wear it. However, over time, the mask becomes a representation of pride and resilience. The speaker of the poem understands that it is fruitless to seek validation from those who oppress the speaker's community, and thus, the speaker uses the mask to gain control over the situation. While the community the speaker represents does not have the opportunity to change its immediate circumstances, the mask gives its wearers the confidence to navigate their oppression with society being none-the-wiser.

## Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "We wear the mask that grins and lies, / It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—"
- **Lines 4-5:** "we smile, / And mouth with myriad subtleties."
- **Line 9:** "We wear the mask."
- **Line 10:** "We smile"
- **Line 15:** "We wear the mask!"



## CLAY

In line 12, the speaker refers to a "clay" that is "vile." This clay isn't the kind of stuff you mold in art class. "Clay" is often used in literature as shorthand for dry, cracked ground/earth on which people walk, while "vile" essentially means wicked, disgusting, or horrible. Here, then, the "vile clay" could be interpreted as representing the speaker's actual environment. Essentially, the world that the speaker must endure is filled with horrific prejudice and injustice. In this reading, "clay" becomes a [metonym](#)—the ground itself coming to represent the society in which the speaker lives.

If the reader chooses to see the poem as a reference specifically to black oppression, then this clay could symbolically represent the poor conditions that black people were subjected to under the institution of slavery. Even more specifically, this clay could evoke the imagery of the plantation; many of the enslaved black population were used as physical laborers for Southern plantations, forced to work long hours in extreme conditions with little-to-no rest, food, water, or adequate clothing.

Because of the poem's focus on the speaker's internal struggle, it is just as likely that this clay is a symbolic representation of the speaker's emotional landscape. The clay, here, suggests an intolerable environment surrounding the speaker and heightens the stakes of the mask. While the speaker has suggested previously that they are an expert in deception and that they choose to wear the mask to hide their pain, the reference to walking through "vile" clay indicates that wearing the mask is not necessarily an easy feat. The clay thus also implicitly reflects the speaker's emotional endurance. The emotional labor of wearing the mask takes its toll on the speaker in a way that *feels* as if the speaker is also struggling physically.

## Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 12:** "clay"



## POETIC DEVICES

## EXTENDED METAPHOR

First introduced in the title (which also acts as a [refrain](#)), the [extended metaphor](#) of the mask serves as the backbone of the poem. The speaker explains the meaning of the mask to the reader in the first stanza, illustrating that this metaphorical mask is a tool used for deceiving others. As the speaker continues, the mask is revealed to be more than a simple con, meant to trick others out of amusement—more specifically, this mask is used to hide its wearers' pain and suffering.

Of course, the group the speaker is a part of doesn't *literally*

wear a mask over their faces at all times; instead, the mask represents the fact that these people have to constantly calibrate their expressions to appease an oppressive, prejudiced society. Members of this marginalized group cannot show their true faces to the world without risking repercussions.

The use of extended metaphor regarding the mask allows the reader to understand the many intricacies of what it means to be oppressed. The mask is initially presented as a forced tool of deception that eventually blossoms into a point of pride: in stanzas 2 and 3, the speaker seems to adopt a tone of defiance while discussing the mask, suggesting that the speaker (and the group associated with the speaker) has begun to celebrate their own ability to survive in such an unjust world.

Overall, then, the mask is a tool of survival and thus representative of the pain of oppression, but it is also a symbolic representation of the speaker's endurance and resilience. When the speaker exclaims, "We wear the mask!" in the final line, the reader is able to understand that the exclamation is one of anger, defiance, exhaustion, and celebration all in one.

#### Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-2
- Lines 3-5
- Lines 6-7
- Lines 8-9
- Lines 10-15

## REFRAIN

"We Wear the Mask" is a rondeau, a type of poem in which the opening words of the first line appear as a [refrain](#) in the last lines of the second and third stanzas.

The refrain of "We Wear the Mask" works outside of the rhyme scheme and meter, which draws more attention to the phrase and its meaning. While the poem employs near-perfect rhyme throughout ("lies" and "eyes"; "guile" and "smile"; etc.), the refrain ends with the word "mask," which doesn't rhyme with anything else in the poem. This makes the mask, as the subject of the poem, remains the focus. This also further alludes to the notion that the mask is inorganic—though the speaker tells the reader that the mask is able to fool others into thinking it is an accurate representation of the speaker's emotions, the argument of the poem is that the mask is actually a deeply inauthentic representation of contentment. Thus, the word itself does not seamlessly blend in with the musicality of the poem, and instead is offset against the rhyme scheme and the musicality of the rhyme.

The phrase "We wear the mask," is also the only instance in the poem where the verse is written in iambic [dimeter](#), rather than the iambic tetrameter that pervades the rest of the piece. This

means that, while the rest of the lines consist of four iambic [feet](#), the refrain only has two iambic feet (*we wear | the mask*). This ensures that the reader is able to both see and hear the difference in the line from the rest of the poem.

The refrain also forces the reader to remember that the mask is a collective experience. Using the pronoun "we" in the phrase "We wear the mask" asserts that the speaker is not an individual, but a member of a group of people who all have adopted the mask. The refrain can also implicate the reader within the "we" of the experience, which can enhance the reader's empathy with the subject matter at hand, i.e. the oppression of a group of people.

The use of the refrain also gives the reader the opportunity to re-understand the mask each time it is reintroduced. While the mask is initially introduced as a general tool of deception, by the end of the second stanza the reader is able to see the mask as a representation of deep suffering. They also are able to see the mask as a choice, or as creating the illusion of choice. When the final refrain appears in the last stanza, the reader can also see the mask as a symbol of empowerment, because it reflects the speaker's emotional resilience and insistence on surviving.

#### Where Refrain appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "We wear the mask"
- **Line 9:** "We wear the mask!"
- **Line 15:** "We wear the mask!"

## ENJAMBMENT

[Enjambment](#) occurs sparingly in the poem, punctuating the plodding rhythm of the poem with spurts of intensity. Much of the poem is [end-stopped](#), with each line carefully calibrated to fit into the poem's steady meter and rhyme scheme; in a way, this heavy end-stop reflects the manner in which members of this oppressed group must carefully compose themselves to get by within a prejudiced society. In a few key spots, however, the speaker's lines clearly spill over from one to the next, indicating a break in this composure—a slip of the mask, perhaps.

The first instance of enjambment comes in line 8, which also is the first time the speaker seems to take on a tone of defiance. Here, the speaker questions the value of showing their true face to society, and instead asserts that wearing the mask can perhaps be a tool of empowerment—a means to deny an unsympathetic society the chance to get to know this group.

Enjambment pops up again between lines 10 and 11, another notable moment of emotional intensity. The "cries" the speaker mentions spill over the line break, indicating the depth and power of the speaker's suffering. Enjambment then occurs a final time between lines 12 and 13, as the speaker unequivocally denounces the world in which this marginalized group must live—calling the "clay" (symbolic of this

society—literally the world in which the speaker walks) "vile," meaning wicked or foul. Again, the poem's lines overflow at a point when the speaker seems to reveal their true feelings.

#### Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 8-9:** "while / We"
- **Lines 10-11:** "our cries / To thee"
- **Lines 12-13:** "vile / Beneath"

## ALLITERATION

Much of the [alliteration](#) of "We Wear the Mask" occurs in the refrain, with the words "We wear." The alliteration of these two words establishes an association between them, especially when considering that the first two letters of the word "wear" are, in fact, "we." This subtly suggests that the action of wearing the mask has become internalized to the point that one's sense of identity is intertwined with the notion of performance (that is, with wearing a mask).

The association between the /w/ sounds continues in stanza 2, with the words "Why," "world," and "-wise" in line 6. The continuous use of the /w/ sounds enhances the questioning tone of this line, which [rhetorically](#) asks the reader (and by extension, the world), "Why should the society pay any attention to the speaker's pain?"

The alliteration in this line also establishes a connection between the words "world," and "wise," which is revisited—and subverted—in the third stanza. The initial relationship of "the world" and "wise" suggests that world *could* be "over-wise" regarding the suffering of the speaker, but *chooses* not to be. In line 14, however, the word "wise" is then attached to the word "otherwise," suggesting that the world has been completely deceived by the speaker's use of the mask.

Another important moment of alliteration is in line 5, between the words "mouth" and "myriad." Much like the other circumstance of alliteration, the /m/ of "mouth" and "myriad," creates a link between the two words, and quietly suggests the idea of thousands of mouths, or at least thousands of versions of one mouth. Notably this alliteration comes in a line discussing the subtleties of language. This continues to promote the themes of the mask as a tool of deception.

#### Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "W," "w"
- **Line 5:** "m," "m"
- **Line 6:** "W," "w," "w"
- **Line 9:** "W," "w"
- **Line 10:** "O," "C," "o," "c"
- **Line 11:** "T," "t"
- **Line 14:** "w," "w"
- **Line 15:** "W," "w"

## CONSONANCE

The [consonance](#) in "We Wear the Mask" does much of the same work as [alliteration](#), connecting various words via sound. In line 10, for example, there is a notable similarity in the sounds of "Christ," and "cries," which both begin with a /kr/ sound, followed by a long /i/ sound ([assonance](#)). This similarity and their proximity to one another draws an association between the two words, indicating to the reader that the "cries" of the speaker belong solely to the speaker's God. This shows the reader that the only moment of vulnerability the speaker allows is with their Lord, which further establishes how hidden the speaker keeps their pain.

There are also many instances of /w/ sounds throughout the poem, which upholds its "us" vs. "them" dynamic. Both "we" and the "world" begin with the letter w, yet the group of which the speaker is a part is clearly *separate* from the rest of the "world." The shared sounds seem to call attention to the fact that the "we" and the "world" aren't all that different, making the "world's" treatment of that "we"—that is, society's treatment of marginalized people—all the more frustrating.

In line 11, the /t/ sounds present in the words "to" and "tortured" echo the previous /t/ sounds in line 7 ("counting" and "tears"). The /t/ sound is thus associated with despair ("tears," "torn," and "torture"), emphasizing the pain that suffuses the poem. With the exception of "to" in line 11, these /t/ sounds also all land on a stressed syllable, which accentuates the sense of pain and suffering.

#### Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "W," "w," "th," "th"
- **Line 2:** "d," "d"
- **Line 3:** "d"
- **Line 5:** "m," "th," "th," "m"
- **Line 6:** "W," "d," "w," "d," "w"
- **Line 7:** "t," "t"
- **Line 8:** "w"
- **Line 9:** "W," "w"
- **Line 10:** "C," "c"
- **Line 11:** "T," "t," "t"
- **Line 14:** "w," "d," "d," "w"
- **Line 15:** "W," "w"

## RHETORICAL QUESTION

The [rhetorical question](#) posed in lines 6 and 7 suggests that society would not care about the pain and suffering of the speaker even if it knew the extent of it. To that end, the speaker seems to be asking, what's the point of removing the "mask" and letting the world see how much these people are truly suffering? To do so would only be inviting an unsympathetic society deeper into this marginalized group—to gawk at, mock, or just ignore the pain it finds there.

On the one hand, then, this rhetorical question highlights the immense lack of empathy on the part of society at large, given that the speaker has no hope that revealing the depth of this group's suffering would change anything.

The rhetorical question also suggests that the smiling mask is not only used to appease society's oppressors, but is also a tool used to deny the oppressors the privilege and pleasure of seeing the pain they have caused. In the next lines, the speaker implies that keeping their suffering to themselves is both a survival mechanism and a means for marginalized people to assert some semblance of autonomy and control over their own lives.

#### Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Lines 6-7:** "Why should the world be over-wise, / In counting all our tears and sighs?"

## ALLUSION

The entirety of "We Wear the Mask" alludes to the plight of black Americans in the United States. Published in 1896, the poem's themes easily lend themselves to the lives of black people following the end of the Civil War. Many expected that the abolition of slavery would be enough to quell the violence and tension caused by racial injustice; however, this poem suggests that racism is alive and well, and that it continues to cause suffering.

Due to the lack of specificity regarding the speaker's circumstances, the reader could extend the themes of this poem to incorporate the specific atrocities committed against enslaved black people in the U.S. as well. The walk through "clay" could be seen as a reference to the manual labor endured by slaves, specifically the ones who worked in the fields on plantations. These people were subjected to extreme weather conditions, and lacked the necessities to sustain themselves while working extremely long hours.

The singing mentioned in line 12 could also be a nod to black spirituals, an oral tradition amongst enslaved people in which they would often sing of Christian values and their hardships. Former slave and black activist Frederick Douglass once remarked that the notion of slaves singing out of joy or contentment was a mistake, however, noting, "Slaves sing most when they are unhappy"—which, in turn, aligns neatly with the theme of "We Wear the Mask."

#### Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-15

## CAESURA

Caesura appears several times throughout "We Wear the Mask," with the majority appearing in the final stanza. These

brief pauses slow the pace of various lines, often in a way that underscores the extent of the speaker's suffering.

In line 10, for instance, caesuras appear twice: as commas that dramatically offset the conjunction "but" in a way that reinforces the sense of contrast between the two parts of this line. First, the speaker admits that this group smiles—but they are suffering to the point that, on the inside, they cry out to God with their pain. Similarly, the caesura that appears in line 12 via the comma after "We sing" underscores this singing as being just another instance of performance, rather than an authentic representation of emotion.

In line 12, the comma that appears between "feet" and "and" underscores that *not only* is the speaker having to stand in "vile" mud, but they must *also* walk through it for a long time. Thus, the caesura is meant to emphasize the speaker's struggle.

One could argue that a caesura appears before the phrase "We wear the mask" in the form of white space, which assists in highlighting the importance and the power of this [refrain](#). The reader could opt to read the white space as a pause or a breath, which creates a sense of anticipation before the refrain is repeated, much like a standard caesura. However, because it is atypical, the white space could also simply be seen as a feature of the refrain.

#### Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** <sup>( )</sup>,
- **Line 10:** <sup>( )</sup> <sup>( )</sup>,
- **Line 12:** <sup>( )</sup>,
- **Line 13:** <sup>( )</sup>,

## ASSONANCE

There are many instances of [assonance](#) in "We Wear the Mask." While the assonance assists the poem in keeping with the musicality of the rondeau form, it also works to enhance the poem's meaning.

For example, in line 10, the shared long /i/ sounds in "smile," "Christ," and "cries" signal to the reader that these words, for the speaker, are inextricable from one another: the smile presented by the speaker always has profound sadness behind it.

Throughout the entirety of the poem, the speaker consistently uses words that have the same long [ɛ] vowel sound (which sounds like "ee"): "we," "cheeks," "bleeding," "see," "feet," "dream," and so on and so forth. Though some of these words are spaced out to the point that they're arguably not true assonance, this sound clearly echoes throughout the poem and accentuates the notion of an "us." Indeed, the very first word if the poem features this sound, and thus each time the sound appears it seems to call back to that initial "we."

"We" represents not just the speaker, but also an entire group

of people who wear the mask. The word "we" is what indicates that this poem is about this group of people, and by extension leads the reader to believe that this poem is about oppression at large rather than a singular person's experience. The poem continuously draws attention to the notion of an "us" by subtly reinforcing it through sound.

#### Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "e"
- **Line 2:** "ee"
- **Line 3:** "e"
- **Line 4:** "ee," "e"
- **Line 5:** "i," "i"
- **Line 6:** "e"
- **Line 8:** "e," "e," "ee"
- **Line 9:** "e"
- **Line 10:** "e," "i," "i," "i"
- **Line 11:** "ee"
- **Line 12:** "e"
- **Line 13:** "e," "ee"
- **Line 14:** "ea"
- **Line 15:** "e"

#### END-STOPPED LINE

The majority of "We Wear the Mask," is [end-stopped](#), with only a few circumstances of [enjambment](#). The end-stopped lines in this poem enforce and enhance the carefully paced meter and rhyme scheme, creating a sense of precision and control that reflects the wearing of the mask itself: just as the mask hides the speaker's unpleasant emotions, the regular end-stops keep the poem in line even as rage and pain broil beneath the surface. In other words, heavy end stops reflect the way in which members of this oppressed group must [metaphorically](#) structure *themselves* to avoid letting their mask slip.

To understand how the end-stops here function, it's useful to consider a moment of enjambment. Take line 10, where a moment of enjambment allows the "cries" to seemingly spill over into line 11—perhaps reflecting a moment of intense suffering piercing through the facade of contentment that the speaker has constructed. However, much like a person must eventually stop crying and compose themselves, the speaker is back to end-stops by the end of line 11, closing out the line with a definitive period.

In line 12, again the speaker loses control of the line, so to speak, while talking about the ceaseless "vile" clay. The speaker is back to end-stop in the very next line, however, again suggesting that the speaker must keep their performance rigid, even in the most horrible of circumstances—and that if their mask happens to slip, it must be righted immediately.

#### Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "lies,"
- **Line 2:** "eyes,—"
- **Line 3:** "guile;"
- **Line 4:** "smile,"
- **Line 5:** "subtleties."
- **Line 6:** "over-wise,"
- **Line 7:** " sighs?"
- **Line 9:** "the mask."
- **Line 11:** "arise."
- **Line 13:** "the mile;"
- **Line 14:** "otherwise,"
- **Line 15:** "the mask!"

#### APOSTROPHE

The poem features two instances of [apostrophe](#). The first comes in line 8, when the speaker seemingly gives an instruction to the group of which the speaker is a part: "Nay, let them only see us, while / We wear the mask." The second, stronger moment of apostrophe comes when the speaker calls out to God in lines 10 and 11, saying, "We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries / To thee from tortured souls arise."

Notice how both of these moments create breaks in the poem's form. Both of the lines in which apostrophe appears contain two or three commas (creating mid-line pauses, or [caesuras](#)) that interrupt the otherwise very smooth [iambic](#) rhythm of the poem. They also are both [enjambéd](#), their contents spilling over beyond the line break. This contrasts with the regular [end-stop](#) that characterizes the majority of the poem.

These formal hiccups suggest that the speaker's mask is slipping a bit, granting the reader a chance to briefly see the pain that exists behind the facade of contentment. Indeed, in line 8, the speaker seems to take on a tone of defiance, suggesting that the rest of society doesn't deserve to see this group as they really are. In line 10, the speaker is talking about crying out to God for some sort of relief or acknowledgment of their suffering. The apostrophe, then, coincides with moments of emotional intensity.

#### Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Lines 8-9:** "Nay, let them only see us, while / We wear the mask."
- **Lines 10-11:** "We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries / To thee from tortured souls arise."



#### VOCABULARY

**Guile** (Line 3) - Guile refers to being sly or cunning. When one has guile, this means they are being deceptive, but perhaps in a way that comes across as charming.

**Myriad** (Line 5) - Myriad refers to a number that is countless, or too large to detail.

**Subtleties** (Line 5) - The word "subtle" is an adjective used to describe something that is nearly imperceptible, or is too complex to be accurately described. As a noun, subtlety or subtleties refers to a thing or multiple things that have this quality. Here, the subtleties refer to the speaker's collection of coded language they use to keep up appearances in the public eye.

**Over-wise** (Line 6) - In this poem, the term "over-wise" refers to being excessively observant or informed.

**Nay** (Line 8) - Nay is a relatively antiquated term meant to say either "no" or "rather" in favor of a word more appropriate. Here, the term works as "rather," with the speaker offering that wearing the mask is a better alternative to demonstrating suffering.

**Vile** (Line 12) - Vile means wicked, disgusting, horrible, etc.

unstressed-stressed pattern, with the only exceptions being lines 9 and 15.

For example, line 1 is an example of regular iambic tetrameter:

We wear | the mask | that grins | and lies,

The line begins with an unstressed syllable ("We") and follows that with a stressed syllable ("wear"). "We wear" thus represents one iambic [foot](#). The rest of this line follows the same pattern.

lamb closely mimics the sound of regular English speech, granting the poem a colloquial feel—a simplicity of sound that belies the complicated, painful themes being broached. The clear, consistent meter it perhaps itself a kind of "mask" for the turmoil bubbling underneath the surface of the poem.

However, this pattern is broken in lines 9 and 15, when the [refrain](#) is introduced. Unlike the rest of the poem, the refrain is written in iambic [dimeter](#), meaning there are only two iambs in the lines (and just four syllables total):

We wear | the mask.

The regularity of the meter throughout this poem enhances the intensity of the much shorter refrain. In other words, in limiting the variation of the meter, the speaker builds expectations that are broken when introducing the refrain. This, in turn, enhances the importance of the refrain, while preventing the regularity of the rhyme scheme and meter from sounding too monotonous.

## RHYME SCHEME

"We Wear the Mask" employs the rhyme scheme of the 15-line rondeau (though it is important to note that the rondeau form has many variations). The rhyme scheme is as follows:

AABBA AABC AABAC

The "C" in this pattern represents the [refrain](#) of the rondeau. The first and the last stanza of the poem follow the exact same rhyme scheme (with the exception of the refrain in the third stanza). Each stanza opens with a rhyming [couplet](#) using the same "A" rhyme, creating a sense of echoing and internal consistency. Most of this poem also uses [perfect rhymes](#), allowing the reader/listener to focus more on the ideas being discussed than to get tripped up by overly complicated language.

However, there is one [slant rhyme](#) with the word "subtleties" in line 5. This is an important moment that contributes to the poem's exploration of deception. The nearly-perfect rhyme scheme builds an expectation of steadiness in the reader, which is then subverted by the slant-rhyme.

This also contributes to sustaining the "subtlety" of expression being described in this line, with the word itself becoming a nearly-imperceptible moment of subversion: because the word



## FORM, METER, & RHYME

### FORM

"We Wear the Mask" is a variation of the rondeau, a form that originated in France in the 14th and 15th centuries. A rondeau consists of three stanzas that incorporate a [refrain](#) and a specific rhyme scheme.

The rondeau has many variants, but the one used here has 15 lines broken up into a quintain (five lines), quatrain (four lines), and a sestet (six lines), with the refrain "We wear the mask" appearing in last lines of the second and third stanzas.

The rondeau was originally paired with music and dancing, with the refrain being sung. This might be subtly alluded to by the singing mentioned in line 12. More broadly, given that singing and dancing are often seen as expressions of joy, the poem's form itself can be thought of as a kind of "mask": even as the poem describes the emotional pain and suffering, it has a pleasant rhythm and meter. If you were to hear this poem without paying close attention to the words, you might even be temporarily enchanted by the steady, bouncy pacing. Like the mask, then, the poem's form is somewhat deceiving.

What's more, given that the poem can be read as speaking specifically to the way black people must pretend to be content while being oppressed by society, the musicality of the rondeau could also be seen as a knowing nod towards the offensive trope of the "happy slave." This trope often included instances of an enslaved black person engaging in song and dance, meant to be a sign of said person's joy.

### METER

"We Wear the Mask" employs a fairly regular [iambic tetrameter](#). Each line contains eight syllables in an

"subtleties" doesn't rhyme perfectly with "lies" or "eyes," it appears to be out of place. However, to a keen ear, the slant rhyme suggests a deliberate slip of the mask, allowing the reader to experience the speaker's expertise in quiet deception.



## SPEAKER

The speaker of "We Wear the Mask" never refers to an individual self—rather than saying, "I wear the mask," the speaker only uses the pronoun "we." By using "we," the reader understands that the speaker is not an outsider or observer, but rather a member of the group being talked about throughout the poem. The speaker is thus both anonymous and genderless, representative of an entire community of people rather than a single human being.

Generally, it is important to separate the identity of the poet from the speaker of a poem. However, it can be safely assumed (based on the context of the time period, the race of the author, and the overall themes of Dunbar's work at large) that this poem is speaking specifically to the black experience under white supremacy. In other words, while the reader could extend the "we" to generally represent any oppressed group, it is perhaps most informative, given the context, to see the "we" as being representative of the black community.

Many scholars have also noted that "We Wear the Mask" could be linked to Dunbar's more controversial dialectic work. Dialectics, or dialect, refers to work that seeks to evoke the language of a particular place or region. Dunbar, for example, would sometimes use a dialect considered specific to black people in the antebellum South, often referred to as a "Negro dialect." Here is an example from Dunbar's "A Cabin Tale":

Whut you say, dah? huh, uh! chile,  
You's enough to dribe me wile.

Dunbar's use of "Negro dialect" in certain works has been criticized as being inaccurate and used to appeal to white readers by adopting racial stereotypes. Scholars have argued that this poem in particular could be Dunbar's way of illustrating that he was well-aware of the prejudices in his dialectic work and that, perhaps upon a closer read, they expose a more nuanced and abstract portrait of black experience through the writer himself.



## SETTING

"We Wear the Mask" offers little information in regards to physical setting. Although the third stanza does mention the "clay," beneath the speaker's feet, this image is more [metaphorical](#) than literal, as it is meant to demonstrate the harsh emotional environment surrounding the speaker. That

being said, were the reader to believe that the poem was meant to illustrate the experience of victims of the United States slave trade, then the environmental details could be interpreted more literally.

The reader could see the poem as taking place during the late 1800s in the United States, as this was the time and place in which the poem was written. However, the poem is generalized enough that it is applicable to any point in time in which an oppressed group of people have suffered.



## CONTEXT

### LITERARY CONTEXT

Paul Laurence Dunbar published "We Wear the Mask" in his collection *Lyrics of Lowly Life* in 1896. While the poem's language and themes are representative of the majority of Dunbar's writing, the poet's popularity in the late 1800s had much to do with his work in something called dialectics (literary work that evokes the language of a specific region or country), especially in regards to his popularity with white readers.

Dunbar's use of "Negro dialect" is debated among scholars (as is the concept of "Negro dialect" in general, as many consider it to be a racist caricature). Some argue that Dunbar's dialectic work is both inaccurate to the groups he seeks to represent and a perpetuation of racist stereotypes meant to attract white readership. Others counter that his dialectic work represents only a fraction of his literary output. "We Wear the Mask" is an especially pertinent poem in this conversation, as many believe that it is Dunbar's way of acknowledging and complicating his dialectic work.

"We Wear the Mask" is also not the only poem in which Dunbar explores his own personal use of the "mask." ["The Poet,"](#) for example, describes a poet who "sang of life" in all of its multitudes but was only praised by "the world" when singing "a jingle in a broken tongue" (that is, in dialect). It appears that Dunbar struggled with feeling somehow complicit in regards to using racist stereotypes in his own writing, but simultaneously compelled to continue doing so because it was the only work white society chose to recognize.

Dunbar's contemporaries included activists and writers W.E.B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, and Frederick Douglass, as well as James D. Corrothers (who wrote poems specifically citing Dunbar, such as "[Me 'n' Dunbar](#)," and "Paul Laurence Dunbar.") and his own wife, poet and musician Alice Moore Dunbar Nelson. Unlike her husband, Alice was criticized for lacking racial themes in her work, with her rebuttal being that she intended to expand upon what black literature could look like, citing that black people could write about more than just the experience of being black (or a Southerner).

Famous black poet and activist Maya Angelou cites Dunbar as a

major literary influence: the title for her autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, is a line from Dunbar's poem, "Sympathy." Angelou also adapted "We Wear the Mask," in which she expanded upon its themes of race, oppression, and survival.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Dunbar was a poet of the post-Reconstruction era of the United States. Reconstruction, which lasted from 1863-1877, was a significant era in the history of civil rights, as it marked the end of both slavery and the Southern state's secession. The term "Reconstruction" both refers to the era, and also refers to the attempt at transforming the former Confederate states after the Civil War.

Reconstruction is largely considered a failure by most historians, for various reasons. For one thing, during this time the "Black Codes" were established in the American South to restrict the recently-freed black population in an attempt to maintain political and social dominance. The Black Codes eventually evolved into Jim Crow laws, which established racial segregation. The Reconstruction era also saw the beginnings of terrorist group the Klu Klux Klan, which targeted black leaders with racially-motivated violence. Thus, while slavery has been outlawed in the United States by Dunbar's day, this certainly did not mark an end to the suffering and discrimination of black Americans.

The year in which "We Wear the Mask" was published—1896—was also the same year in which the United States Supreme Court upheld the legality of racial segregation, via the Plessy v. Ferguson court case. Homer Plessy, a biracial man from Louisiana, violated the Separate Car Act, which stated that white people and black people must ride in separate train cars. The case went to trial and ultimately resulted in a loss for Plessy, with the Supreme Court establishing that, as long as public facilities were "equal" in quality, the separation of black people from white people was constitutional.

This emotional impact of this event (and of racial segregation and racism as a whole) roots itself in "We Wear the Mask," which highlights the coded ways in which the African American

people conducted themselves under white supremacy.



## MORE RESOURCES

### EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [A Reading of "We Wear the Mask"](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b00qwOgFplk) — Listen to the poem read out loud. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b00qwOgFplk>)
- [Dunbar's Life and Legacy](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/paul-laurence-dunbar) — More information about Paul Laurence Dunbar's biography from the Poetry Foundation. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/paul-laurence-dunbar>)
- [Critiques of the Poem](http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/a_f/dunbar/mask.htm) — An archive of scholarly critiques of "We Wear the Mask." ([http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/a\\_f/dunbar/mask.htm](http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/a_f/dunbar/mask.htm))
- [Maya Angelou's Interpretation](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_HLol9InMlc&list=RD_HLol9InMlc&start_radio=1&t) — Maya Angelou reads her adaptation of Dunbar's poem, which further expands upon the themes of black experience, coded language, and survival. ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_HLol9InMlc&list=RD\\_HLol9InMlc&start\\_radio=1&t](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_HLol9InMlc&list=RD_HLol9InMlc&start_radio=1&t))
- [More Poems by Dunbar](https://etc.usf.edu/lit2go/collections/1/the-complete-poems-of-paul-laurence-dunbar/) — Access to more of the poet's literary work. (<https://etc.usf.edu/lit2go/collections/1/the-complete-poems-of-paul-laurence-dunbar/>)



## HOW TO CITE

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