

# "We Wear the Mask" Worksheet

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Read the poem and answer the questions below.

We Wear the Mask  
By Paul Laurence Dunbar

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!

Let's figure out the **rhyme scheme** or pattern.

1. Lines 1 and 2 rhyme at the end with *lies* and *eyes*. Lines 6 and 7 have the same rhyme with *over-wise* and *sighs*. Find three more lines that rhyme with lines 1, 2, 6 and 7 and write the line numbers:

\_\_\_\_\_

2. Find five more lines that rhyme with each other and write the line numbers:

\_\_\_\_\_

Alliteration, consonance, and assonance

3. **Alliteration** is the same beginning consonant sound in nearby words. For example, in "crazy ketchup" both words begin with the hard c or k sound.

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

Find the alliteration in the above two lines (look at the beginning sounds of words):

\_\_\_\_\_

4. **We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries**

Find the alliteration in the line above:

\_\_\_\_\_

5. **Consonance** is similar consonant sounds. Alliteration is similar consonant sounds at the beginning of words, so alliteration is a special type of consonance. Let's find consonance that's not at the beginning of words.

It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes

In the line above you have consonance in the dz-sound in the words *hides* and *shades*. Try to find another example of consonance at the end of two words in that same line:

\_\_\_\_\_

6. **Assonance** is similar vowel sounds in nearby words.

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

In the two lines above you have the long i-sound in the words *lies*, *hides*, *eyes*.

Where does assonance occur in the line below?

**Beneath our feet, and long the mile;**

\_\_\_\_\_

7. Where does assonance occur in the line below?

**We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries**

\_\_\_\_\_

8. Now for a little **meter**.

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

da **DUM** || da **DUM** || da **DUM** || da **DUM**

Notice that the second syllable (the bolded parts) is **stressed**. You say those syllables more loudly and with more emphasis. This creates a special **rhythm**. If you were to play this on a drum, you would beat every second syllable harder than the one before -- da **DUM** || da **DUM** || da **DUM** || da **DUM**.



21. True or false? In the above two lines, the speaker is asking why should the world know how miserable "we" actually are.

22. True or false? The speaker says that "we" should take off the mask so the world can see "our" real selves. Write below the line or lines that support your answer:

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23. In the following lines,

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

who is "thee"?

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24. **\*Bonus question!\*** In the above lines, the speaker addresses Christ as if Christ were there with him. What kind of rhetorical device is this where someone who is absent is addressed?

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25. True or false? Underneath the happy mask, "we" are really suffering and miserable. Find at least two quotes that support your answer:

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26. In the line,

**But let the world dream otherwise,**

the speaker is saying the world should be allowed to

- a. believe that "we" are happy
- b. believe that "we" are miserable
- c. dream whatever the world wants to dream
- d. none of the above

27. Wearing a mask is a **metaphor** for what? (Hint: What is meant by wearing a mask? Is someone literally wearing a real mask?)

28. If you have done your research on Paul Lawrence Dunbar, you should know that he was an African American poet who was born in the late 1800s and died at the age of 33 in 1906. So, he was born not too long after the end of the Civil War and the emancipation of slaves. The "we" in the poem most likely represents the African Americans suffering from racism and discrimination. Why do you think "we" -- African Americans -- wear the mask? Do they have to wear a mask? What would happen if they didn't wear a mask and showed the world how much they suffered? Write a short paragraph to answer this question.

29. Can the "we" stand for everyone? Do other people, besides African Americans, wear a mask? Do they hide what they really feel? What about you? Do you think you wear a mask sometimes? Write a short paragraph to answer this question.

## "We Wear the Mask" Worksheet **Answers**

1. lines 10, 11, 14
2. lines 3, 4, 8, 12, 13
3. the w-sound in while we / Wear
4. the hard c-sound in Christ ... cries
5. the s-sound at the end of cheeks...eyes
6. the long e-sound in beneath...feet
7. the long i-sound in smile...Christ...cries
8. **This debt we pay to human guile;** -- Yes, it's iambic tetrameter
9. No, it's iambic dimeter (2 feet to a meter).
10.  
myriad (adjectives) very many, a great number of  
subtleties (noun) something that is deceptive or devious  
nay (adverb) an archaic word for "no"  
vile (adjective) disgusting, extremely unpleasant, miserably poor and degrading  
otherwise (adverb) in another way; differently
11. Sentences should use the word with the meanings above.
12. "We" refers to African Americans of Dunbar's time suffering from racism and discrimination
13. False, " We wear the mask that grins..."; " With torn and bleeding hearts we smile"; "We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries"; "We sing, but oh the clay is vile" (any three)
14. shades, guile, subtleties
15. human deception or human trait of tricking people into believing a falsehood
16. by wearing a mask; in other words, by pretending to be happy on the outside when we are really suffering on the inside
17. personification (human guile, an abstract idea, is given the human trait being able to receive payment for debt, to being owed a debt)
18. c
19. b
20. a
21. True
22. False, "Nay, let them only see us, while / We wear the mask." OR "But let the world dream otherwise,"
23. Christ
24. apostrophe
25. True, "With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,"; "Why should the world be over-wise, / In counting all our tears and sighs?"; "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;" (any two)
26. a
27. Wearing a mask is a metaphor for hiding one's true thoughts and feelings and showing something different on the outside to the world.
28. Answers may vary somewhat. One answer might be: During the time period in which the poet lived, African Americans had to, in a sense, wear a mask to get along with white people. White people were responsible for the suffering of African Americans through racism and discrimination, so if blacks didn't wear a mask and the whites saw their suffering they would be disturbed in their idea that all was well. This could have provoked white people into treating African Americans even worse than they were treated because people often grow angry and lash out when their wrongs are held up to them. Another answer might be: African Americans might have worn a mask or hidden their suffering out of a sense of privacy or dignity or pride. Most people usually do not want to show everyone that they are suffering as it could be an admission of weakness or lack of self-control over their emotions.
28. Answers may vary. (Of course, African Americans are not the only ones to wear a mask. Anyone could wear a mask, so the experience described in the poem could be universalized and applied to all people.)