

# We wear the mask by paul laurence dunbar

[Linguistics](#), [English](#)



We Wear the Mask Upon the first reading of “ We Wear the Mask,” one is immediately convinced of the universality with which Paul Laurence Dunbar speaks of peoples’ hypocrisies. After all, there are an infinite number of instances where people put up facades to hide their true feelings or circumstances. This general truth appears to be the message being conveyed by Dunbar, until one looks into his history and finds out that Paul Laurence Dunbar, born the son of slaves, is one of the first nationally accepted African-American writers in history. Dunbar wrote frequently and candidly about the life of the Negro of nineteenth century America, and knowing this one quickly begins to realize that “ We Wear the Mask” is also about the black experience of that time. This broaches the thesis that “ We Wear the Mask” is not only a poem that employs a metaphor, but is itself a metaphor, disguising the specific issue of racism and prejudice within the larger issue of the universal human tendency to hide behind pretensions. Immediately striking is the way each paragraph reiterates the title, and the fact that the poem begins with that title draws attention to its significance. The first and obvious question, “ What is the Mask?” because the author could have assumed the more general “ We wear Masks.” The fact that there is one Mask specifically referred to leads the reader to feel that Dunbar referred to one particular hypocrisy, and this bolsters the thesis of a specific issue hidden underneath the general condition. The next question is the word “ We.” Who is We? Obviously it includes a group of people including Dunbar, but may or may not include the reader. It turns out with subsequent readings that Dunbar meant for “ We” to be both – outwardly it appears to speak of all people, but at a deeper level it really speaks in particular of the

disadvantaged African-American who wears the Mask of an oppressed people. The poem's style and meter appear to contribute to the theme of lament and outcry forcibly restrained by the need to conform. The poem's lines are written in iambic tetrameter, except for the ninth and fifteenth lines where the title is repeated. Even the rhyme is strictly patterned, in AABBA pattern for the first and third stanzas, and the same two rhyming sounds used throughout the poem instead of changing from stanza to stanza. Also, the use of the long I sound is used in both rhyming sounds. In short, the poem's structure and form are stringently detailed and delimiting, which contrasts greatly with the utter desperation and defiance conveyed by the tormented words and images within the lines: " With torn and bleeding hearts, we smile" (line 4); " Why should the world be over-wise...Nay, let them only see us while We wear the mask" (lines 6 to 9); " O great Christ, our cries to thee from tortured souls arise" (line 10 to 11). The image of the ravaged hearts and tortured souls convey despair, yet the author defies the outside world to even catch a glimpse of this. The concealment is therefore of the oppressed people's own volition, self-imposed even while they suffer the torment. Dunbar only hints at the reason in lines 6 to 9, preferring to leave the world guessing without fully knowing their vulnerabilities. Donning the Mask may be seen as an act of self-preservation, a defensive means of avoiding annihilation by the oppressors. Aside from metaphor, the poem also employs alliteration and apostrophe among its figures of speech to create greater depth and advance the meaning conveyed. Alliteration may be seen in the repeated use of the consonant sound " w" throughout the poem, but mostly in the first two stanzas. The repeated " w" creates the feeling of

going roundabout without getting anywhere, an absence of progression, a sensation of being contained or trapped and pulled back to where one began. Apostrophe is seen in the third stanza, with the call to Christ and reference to Him in the second person. Apostrophe is a figure of speech where the author (or speaker) suddenly deviates from the earlier part of his discourse in order to speak to or address an absent person as if he were present. The implication here is that Christ, though called upon, was absent, and the urgent cries to Him went unheard. “ We Wear the Mask” may be a short poem of fourteen lines contained in three short stanzas. However, its meaning has many layers, and the masterful way it was written challenges the reader to discern each layer with the several devices and techniques the author had woven into the poem. Dunbar succeeded in hiding within this deceptively simple poem the complexity of being an African-American in the nineteenth century.