

"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**.

Each unstressed and stressed syllable (da DUM) is called an **iamb**. There are four of them, so this meter is called **iambic tetrameter** ("**tetra**" means four).

1 2 3 4
It **hides** || our **cheeks** || and **shades** || our **eyes**,—
1 2 3
unstressed **stressed** || unstressed **stressed** || unstressed
4
stressed || unstressed **stressed**

Underline the syllables that are stressed in the line below:

This debt we pay to human guile;

Is this iambic tetrameter or something else?

9. Underline the syllables that are stressed in the line below:

We wear the mask!

Bonus question! Is this iambic tetrameter? If not, what is it called?

Now we're going to try to figure out what this poem means or is trying to say. To do that you have to first look up any words you don't know.

10. Write down the meaning of the six underlined words in the poem. Be sure to choose the definition in the dictionary that fits the meaning of the word as it is used in the poem. Also, write the part of speech of the word, as it is used in the poem. The first one has been done for you:

guile (noun) skillful deceit or trickery

11. Now write a sentence using each word you looked up in #10.

12. **Research:** Read about the life of Paul Lawrence Dunbar on the internet. Who do you think "we" refers to in the poem? In other words, who is "we"?

13. True or false? The mask that "we" wear is a mask that shows our suffering and misery. Find at least two lines that support your answer:

14. We wear a mask to deceive other people, so they don't know what we really feel or think. Find the words in the first stanza that suggest deception. *lies* and *hides* are two of

them. Find three more.

15. The person speaking in the poem is called the **speaker**. It is not always the poet though it could be. When the speaker says,

This debt we pay to human guile;

what does he mean by "human guile"?

16. How do we pay off our debt to human guile? by doing what?

17. What kind of figure of speech is contained in this line?

18. In this line,

And mouth with myriad subtleties.

what part of speech is "mouth"?

- a. adjective
- b. noun
- c. verb
- d. adverb
- e. none of the above

19. What does "mouth" mean in the line above?

- a. part of the body that we eat and speak with
- b. to speak
- c. to frown
- d. to smile
- e. none of the above

20. In the following lines,

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

what does "over-wise" mean?

- a. too knowing
- b. too smart-alecky
- c. finished
- d. upside down
- e. none of the above

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:

23. In the following lines,

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

who is "thee"?

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?

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

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.