

# **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 over-wise,  
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!

# We Wear the Mask Introduction

Times were tough in America during the turn of the century (before the days of Netflix and Slurpees). Lots of changes were occurring, and many folks had a difficult time coming to terms with them. Black Americans in particular found themselves caught in a culture that *appeared* somewhat better than it had been before and during the Civil War. But the fact of the matter was things just weren't so peachy.

[Paul Laurence Dunbar](#)'s poem, first published in *Lyrics of Lowly Life* (1896), is a reaction to the racial climate of the late nineteenth century. He talks about hypocrisy, deception, and the fact that black Americans often resorted to *seeming* content with their social circumstances. But behind all that seeming, though, is just a bunch of lies trying to cover up the fact that they were feeling pretty rotten and unable to talk about their feelings in an honest way.

So what we get in "**We Wear the Mask**" is a lyrical exploration of all that pretending and the truth that hides behind it. And since the truth is a rather painful one, we get the sense that all of those masks aren't doing such a great job of covering things up.

By now you're probably thinking that Dunbar's work is going to leave you feeling really angry or really sad. But there's a silver lining to this poem, as difficult as it may be to find. Dunbar was one of the first to create a more objective perspective of what was going on in American culture. In other words, he kind of took a step back and looked at things in a less personal, less emotional way, making "We Wear the Mask" applicable to all sorts of people and circumstances. By doing that, he opened up the world of poetic interpretation in a much more universal way.

## Why Should I Care?

[Paul Lawrence Dunbar](#) is considered to be the first major black poet in America. He helped pave the way for the artists of the [Harlem Renaissance](#) that came later in the 1920s. And more importantly, he was one of the few African Americans of his time speaking honestly about the hypocrisy he saw around him.

All of that took a lot of guts, since it was pretty dangerous back then for black Americans to speak out about white supremacy and social injustices. Those guts became a major inspiration, not just for the artists that came after him, but also for folks in America (both black and white) who needed a good dose of reality.

So, as you read "We Wear the Mask," consider not only the courage that came with writing it but also the message that we can still apply to today's culture. After all, it's not like somebody suddenly waved a magic wand and made all of the prejudices and hypocrisies of the world disappear. These kinds of problems are still around today, and if folks don't speak up about them, none of us can really expect to see them change, right?

Modified from: <https://www.shmoop.com/we-wear-the-mask/>