

## Analyzing Poetry

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

"We Wear the Mask"

By Paul Laurence Dunbar

Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906) was an influential African American poet during the early twentieth century. He was the son of freed slaves and a friend of Frederick Douglass. Critics have said that "[h]e was the first to rise to a height from which he could take a perspective view of his own race. He was the first to see objectively its humor, its superstitions, its shortcomings; the first to feel sympathetically its heart-wounds, its yearnings, its aspirations, and to voice them all in a purely literary form."

### 1. What is the central idea?

- What is the main idea from each stanza? Try to summarize each to help

Stanza 1:

Stanza 2:

Stanza 3:

### 2. Why should people wear the mask?

- What evidence shows that people should wear the mask?

### 3. In the final stanza, what does a long mile represent? (give an example)

- What could it represent in your life?

4. Does the speaker seem genuine when he recommends wearing 'the mask'? Consider when the poem was written and the tone the speaker uses. Cite evidence from the text to support your answer.

- What does it mean to be genuine?
- What words in the poem show the speaker is genuine?

**As you read the poem, take notes on Dunbar's use of figurative language and diction, and what these devices reveal about the poem's theme.**

We Wear the Mask (1896)

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!

### Notes

1. **Guile** (*noun*) : sly or cunning intelligence; the use of clever and usually dishonest methods to achieve something
2. **Myriad** (*adjective*) : countless
3. **Subtleties** (*noun*) : small details or differences that are important but not obvious
4. **Vile** (*adjective*) : extremely unpleasant; wicked or immoral