

We Wear the Mask

Paul Laurence Dunbar · 1895

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,
5 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.

10 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,
15 We wear the mask!

WE WEAR THE MASK · Paul Laurence Dunbar

BEFORE YOU READ

Dunbar was the son of two people who were born into slavery, and he published this in his early twenties. That's all you need to know before you read it.

READ IT TWICE

Read it once out loud — it was built to be heard. Then go back and read it slowly, and see if you can work out who we is.

THREE QUESTIONS

1. The mask grins and lies — but Dunbar tells you what is underneath it. Two things. Can you find them both?
2. He says *let them only see us*. Who do you think **them** is? There is no single right answer here — say what you think, and where you got it from.
3. The line *We wear the mask* turns up three times in this poem. Look at how each one ends. What changes — and does the poem change with it?

COMING UP

Next in your reading is *The Outsiders*. It is about a boy everyone has already made up their mind about. Watch for where he puts the mask on, and who he takes it off for. And keep an eye out for Dunbar — you have not read the last of him.

What this is

One week from **The Grade 7 Reading Year** — a thirty-two week literature course for one child, built around five books and seven short pieces like this one. This is how the year opens.

HOW IT WORKS

Four days of reading, one day of talking. That rhythm never changes all year. This page takes about twenty minutes: read it once, read it again, then talk about the three questions. **Nothing here is graded**, and you do not have to have read anything in advance.

THE FIVE BOOKS YOUR CHILD READS THIS YEAR

The Outsiders

S. E. Hinton

A Christmas Carol

Charles Dickens

Merci Suárez Changes Gears

Meg Medina

Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry

Mildred D. Taylor

A Midsummer Night's Dream

William Shakespeare

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

You are not looking for the right reading — there isn't one. You are listening for your child to point at a word. If they say the poem is sad, ask which word made them think so. That single question is the entire skill this year teaches.

There is one of these for every book and every short piece in the year. They are the half of the course written for you rather than your child — the whole set is in the Year Guide at litpads.com.