We Wear the Mask

by Paul Laurence Dunbar

1896

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| [5]  [10]  [15] | We wear the mask that grins and lies,  It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes, —  This debt**[[1]](#footnote-1)** we pay to human guile**[[2]](#footnote-2)**;  With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,  And mouth with myriad subtleties.**[[3]](#footnote-3)**  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, oh great Christ, our cries  To thee from tortured souls arise.  We sing, but, oh, the clay**[[4]](#footnote-4)** is vile**[[5]](#footnote-5)**  Beneath our feet, and long the mile;  But let the world dream otherwise,  We wear the mask! | **Illustration:**  **Description:**  **Theme Statement:** |

1. *here, having a debt to pay means having an obligation, or something one must do* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. ***guile*** *(noun) clever but sometimes dishonest behavior that one uses to deceive others* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *“mouth with myriad subtleties” may refer to the many expectations for “respectful” speech, such as calling someone sir or ma’am* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *here, clay refers to the earth or ground beneath one’s feet* [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. ***vile*** *(adjective) disgusting* [↑](#footnote-ref-5)