

WE WEAR THE MASK

by Paul Laurence Dunbar

1896

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes, —
This debt¹ we pay to human guile²;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
[5] And mouth with myriad subtleties.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.

[10] We smile, but, oh great Christ, our cries
To thee from tortured souls arise.
We sing, but, oh, the clay⁴ is vile⁵
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
But let the world dream otherwise,
[15] We wear the mask!

Illustration:

Description:

Theme Statement:

¹ here, having a debt to pay means having an obligation, or something one must do

² **guile** (noun) clever but sometimes dishonest behavior that one uses to deceive others

³ “mouth with myriad subtleties” may refer to the many expectations for “respectful” speech, such as calling someone sir or ma’am

⁴ here, clay refers to the earth or ground beneath one’s feet

⁵ **vile** (adjective) disgusting