

“We Wear the Mask” is one of Paul Laurence Dunbar’s most recognized works as it explores the complex emotions of being African American in a racially divided world.

The idea of the mask points to the duality that Blacks experienced in everyday life, Du Bois in his work *The Souls of Black Folks* also comments on this duality calling it “double consciousness” in which the African American is divided by two worlds- two identities- the African and American.

As a result of this duality, many African Americans are forced to live behind a veil, much like the mask that Dunbar discusses in this poem.

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!

The tone of the poem is a combination of anger, despair, and sadness. Dunbar expresses his anger of having to hide his emotions.

The poem starts with Dunbar speaking for the entire black community. He expresses his anger of having to hide his emotions. When they are being lynched and discriminated against, they are forced to take it and mask their true emotions with a smile. In the third stanza, Dunbar tells of how they try crying to Christ for help. The rest of the world, however, ignored their cries and were not aware of the black community's struggle for equal rights. The last line of the poem shows Dunbar realization that their efforts are not working, and they will continue to have to "wear the mask".