

The “We” in Paul Laurence Dunbar’s “We Wear the Mask”

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After reading many poems in the textbook, I finally decide to choose Paul Laurence Dunbar’s “We Wear the Mask” as the topic of my final paper because the words “we” and “mask” in the title greatly arouse my interest about this poem. When I finish reading it, I become extremely curious about who the “we” are in the context. Why do the “we” wear the mask to conceal their feelings? Are they being persecuted or having difficulty expressing their true feelings? What are the reasons that make them deceive other people? Therefore, I decide to analyze the poem to find out the answer, and I adopt two ways to look into the poem: examining what “we” refers to by comprehending Dunbar’s diction and doing some researches about Dunbar to see whether his background has any relation with the poem.

Firstly, I approach to the word “we” by understanding Paul’s diction. In the beginning, the word “the Mask” in the title hints that there are a group of people wearing the same *mask* of the same pattern because the word *mask* is a countable noun. However, Paul writes the word in singular form to express the *mask*, so I suppose that the “we” are a group of people who wear the same mask. Next, several words in this poem connote that “we” may be the people who are tortured, attacked, or persecuted by some other people or things. For example, the following words, such as “with torn and bleeding hearts” (line 4), “counting our all tears and sighs” (line 7),

and “from tortured souls” (line 11), just show that “we” are under torturous situations or attack because the hearts of the “we” are “bleeding” and “torn” and their faces are full of tears. Although “we” are seriously hurt, they still “grin” (line 1) and “smile” (line 4) to conceal their true feelings. In this respect, I think that “we” are the people who are under persecutions and who conceal their true feelings from the inflictors by wearing the mask. Besides, I also wonder whether the inflictors will harm the underdogs if the underdogs directly express their true feelings; otherwise, “we” should not hide their emotions. Moreover, the words related to the religion, “O great Christ” (line 10), show up in the beginning of the third stanza, and “we” raise their cries from the bottom of their tortured souls to Christ. Through their crying to Christ, I guess “we” are Christians, and they hope Christ to save them from the world in which they need to wear the mask. Consequently, according to the three aforementioned points about Paul’s diction in the poem, I suppose that the “we” are a specific group of people who believe in Christianity and who are forced to wear the mask to conceal their true feelings.

Secondly, I explore the meaning of “we” by searching for the information about Paul Laurence Dunbar to see whether his experience or background have relationship with “we” in his poem. After doing some research about Dunbar, I learn that he was a black American born just after Civil War and that his parents were slaves. At that time,

although black men seemed free from slavery, people were still prejudiced and blacks were persecuted by white men. From his childhood to adulthood, Dunbar directly saw how white men treated and persecuted black men in every aspect, including working, civil rights, et cetera. When black men protested to white men about their rights, white men usually attacked them. Hence, I think Paul's experience has relationship with "we" in his "We Wear the Mask" because "we" are seriously oppressed and crucified, just like the black men that Paul saw in his life. In addition, black men are being harmed by white men when they express their true feelings, just like the "we" in this poem. Therefore, I think Dunbar's background and experience are in connection with the "we" in the poem, just like the black men that he saw in his life – being oppressed and concealing their own feelings.

To sum up, after analyzing the words used in "We Wear the Mask" and reading some information about Dunbar's background, I find some overlapping characteristics in the two aspects – both the "we" and black men believe in Christianity, conceal their true feelings, and are seriously tortured and oppressed. In conclusion, I know that the "we" in the poem are the black men that use the same mask, an abstract mask like smile, grin, and silence, to conceal their feelings from their inflictors. The "we" are tortured, oppressed, attacked; however, they are forced to smile, endure, and wear the mask. Via Dunbar's poem, the misery, suffering, and truth under the mask are

revealed, and so are the grief and agony of the “we,” reserved continually and forever.

WE WEAR THE MASK

by: Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906)

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 oh 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!