

# **Of Masks and Cages: Exploring Symbolism in the Poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar**

**Museum Connection:** Art and Enlightenment

**Purpose:** In this lesson students will explore how the poet Paul Laurence Dunbar used symbolism and other literary features in his poetry to comment on African American identity and the quest for racial equality during the late 1800s.

**Course:** English, grades 9-12

**Time Frame:** 2-3 class periods

## **English Core Learning Goals (Assessment Limits):**

- 1.2.3: Identifying and explaining the effect and/or effectiveness of symbolism, repetition, figurative language, details, organizational patterns, and structural features as each contributes to the author’s purpose.
- 1.2.4: Analyzing the ways in which different texts illustrate a similar theme.
- 1.2.5: Identifying and/or explaining ideas and issues of a text or across texts that may have implications for readers or contemporary society. Extending ideas found in a text or across texts by connecting them to ideas that have personal or societal relevance
- 4.2.5: Explaining how repetitions of words, phrases, structural features, and ideas affect the meaning and/or tone of a text.

## **Common Core State Reading Standards for Literature 6-12**

- Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.
- By the end of grade 9, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, in the grades 9-10 text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range.
- By the end of grade 12, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, at the high end of the grades 11-CCR text complexity band independently and proficiently.

## **Objectives:**

- Students will discuss, through analysis and personal response, how Paul Laurence Dunbar uses symbolism and other literary features in his poems “We Wear the Mask” and “Sympathy” to comment on African-American identity and the quest for racial equality during the late 1800s.
- Students will write a short essay describing how Paul Laurence Dunbar uses symbolism in his poem “Sympathy.”
- Students will incorporate symbols and figurative language in a piece of original writing.

## Vocabulary and Concepts:

Word or Concept	Definition
Chalice	a metal drinking cup or goblet.
Fain	willing, eager, or forced by obligation to do something.
Guile	a cunning, deceitful, or treacherous quality.
Myriad	so many that they cannot be counted; a very large number.
Subtlety	a quality that is not obvious; a nuance
Vile	despicable, shameful, and/or causing disgust.

## Materials:

### *For the Teacher:*

- Teacher Resource Sheet 1: Symbolism Worksheet (with sample student responses)
- Teacher Resource Sheet 2: “Sympathy” Group Analysis Response Sheet (with sample student responses)

### *For the Student:*

- Student Resource Sheet 1: Dunbar Biography
- Student Resource Sheet 2: “We Wear the Mask” (poem)
- Student Resource Sheet 3: “We Wear the Mask” Symbolism Worksheet
- Student Resource Sheet 4: “We Wear the Mask” Group Analysis Response Sheet
- Student Resource Sheet 5: “Sympathy” (poem)
- Student Resource Sheet 6: “Sympathy” Group Analysis Response Sheet
- Student Resource Sheet 7: “Sympathy” Short Essay Assignment

## Resources:

### *Publications:*

Giovanni, Nikki. *Shimmy Shimmy Shimmy Like My Sister Kate: Looking at the Harlem Renaissance through Poems*. New York: Henry Holt and Co., Inc., 1996.

### *Web Sites:*

For information on Paul Laurence Dunbar and his poems: <http://www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/302>

For definitions of words: [www.dictionary.com](http://www.dictionary.com)

For audio reading of “We Wear the Mask”: <http://www.dunbarsite.org/gallery/WeWearTheMask.asp>

For audio reading of “Sympathy”: <http://www.dunbarsite.org/gallery/Sympathy.asp>

## Historical Background:

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul\\_Laurence\\_Dunbar](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_Laurence_Dunbar)

### *Early life*

Paul Laurence Dunbar was born in a home at 311 Howard Street in Dayton, Ohio on June 27, 1872. His parents had escaped from slavery in Kentucky; his father was a veteran of the American Civil War, having served in the 55th Massachusetts Infantry Regiment and the 5th Massachusetts Colored Cavalry Regiment. Dunbar was born six months into their marriage; their wedding was Christmas Eve, 1871.

Dunbar's parents, Joshua and Matilda, began having marital problems a few months after their son's birth. After the birth of her daughter, who was ignored by Joshua, Matilda took the children, including two from a previous marriage, and left him. Joshua died in 1884 when Dunbar was 12 years old.

Dunbar was the only African-American student during the years he attended Dayton's Central High School, and he participated actively as a student. During high school, he was both the editor of the school newspaper and class president, as well as the president of the school literary society. He wrote his first poem at age six and gave his first public recital at age nine. His mother Matilda assisted him in his schooling, having learned how to read expressly for that purpose. She often read the Bible with him and thought he might become a minister for the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

### ***Writing career***

Dunbar's first professionally published poems were "Our Martyred Soldiers" and "On the River," published in Dayton's *The Herald* newspaper in 1888. In 1890 Dunbar wrote and edited Dayton's first weekly African-American newspaper, *The Tattler*, printed by the fledgling company of his high school acquaintances Wilbur and Orville Wright. The paper lasted only six weeks.

When his formal schooling ended in 1891, Dunbar took a job as an elevator operator, earning a salary of four dollars a week. The next year, Dunbar asked the Wrights to publish his dialect poems in book form, but the brothers did not have the facility to do so. Dunbar was directed to the United Brethren Publishing House which, in 1893, printed Dunbar's first collection of poetry, *Oak and Ivy*. Dunbar subsidized the printing of the book himself, though he earned back his investment in two weeks by selling copies personally, often to passengers on his elevator. The larger section of the book, the "Oak" section, consisted of traditional verse whereas the smaller section, the "Ivy," featured light poems written in dialect. The work attracted the attention of James Whitcomb Riley, the popular "Hoosier Poet." Both Riley and Dunbar wrote poems in both standard English and dialect.

Despite frequently publishing poems and occasionally giving public readings, Dunbar had difficulty financially supporting himself and his mother. Many of his efforts were unpaid and he was a reckless spender, leaving him in debt by the mid-1890s.

On June 27, 1896, the novelist, editor, and critic William Dean Howells published a favorable review of Dunbar's second book, *Majors and Minors*. Howells's influence made Dunbar famous and brought national attention to his writing. Though he saw "honest thinking and true feeling" in Dunbar's traditional poems, he particularly praised Dunbar's dialect poems. With his new-found international literary fame, Dunbar collected his first two books into one volume, *Lyrics of Lowly Life*, which included an introduction by Howells.

Dunbar maintained a lifelong friendship with the Wrights. He was also associated with Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington and Brand Whitlock (who was described as a close friend). He was honored with a ceremonial sword by President Theodore Roosevelt.

### ***Later work***

Dunbar wrote a dozen books of poetry, four books of short stories, five novels, and a play. He also wrote lyrics for *In Dahomey*—the first musical written and performed entirely by African-Americans to appear on Broadway in 1903. One of the more successful theatrical productions of its time, the musical comedy successfully toured England and America over a period of four years. His essays and poems were published widely in the leading journals of the day. His work appeared in *Harper's Weekly*, the *Saturday Evening Post*, the *Denver Post*, *Current Literature* and a number of other publications. During his life, considerable emphasis was laid on the fact that Dunbar was of pure black descent.

Dunbar traveled to England in 1897 to recite his works on the London literary circuit. He met the young black composer Samuel Coleridge-Taylor who set some of his poems to music and who was influenced by Dunbar to use African and American Negro songs and tunes in future compositions.

## ***Marriage and declining health***

After returning from England, Dunbar married Alice Ruth Moore on March 6, 1898, a teacher and poet from New Orleans who he had met three years earlier. Dunbar called her "the sweetest, smartest little girl I ever saw." A graduate of Cornell University, with a Master's Degree, her most famous works include a short story entitled "Violets." She and her husband also wrote books of poetry as companion pieces. An account of their love, life and marriage was depicted in a play by Kathleen McGhee-Anderson entitled *Oak and Ivy*.

Dunbar took a job at the Library of Congress in Washington in October 1897. He and his wife moved to Washington, D.C., in the LeDroit Park neighborhood. Under the urging of his wife, however, he soon left the job to focus on his writing, which he promoted through public readings.

In 1900, he was diagnosed with tuberculosis and his doctors recommended drinking whisky to alleviate his symptoms. He moved to Colorado with his wife on the advice of his doctors. Dunbar and his wife separated in 1902, but they never divorced. Depression and declining health drove him to a dependence on alcohol, which further damaged his health. He moved back to Dayton to be with his mother in 1904. Dunbar died from tuberculosis on February 9, 1906, at age thirty-three. He was interred in the Woodland Cemetery in Dayton.

## ***Literary style***

Dunbar's work is known for its colorful language and a conversational tone, with a brilliant rhetorical structure. These traits were well matched to the tune-writing ability of Carrie Jacobs-Bond (1862–1946), with whom he collaborated.

## ***Use of dialect***

Much of Dunbar's work was authored in conventional English, while some was rendered in African-American dialect. Dunbar remained always suspicious that there was something demeaning about the marketability of dialect poems. One interviewer reported that Dunbar told him, "I am tired, so tired of dialect," though he is also quoted as saying, "my natural speech is dialect" and "my love is for the Negro pieces."

Though he credited William Dean Howells with promoting his early success, Dunbar was dismayed by his demand that he focus on dialect poetry. Angered that editors refused to print his more traditional poems, he accused Howells of "[doing] my irrevocable harm in the dictum he laid down regarding my dialect verse." Dunbar, however, was continuing a literary tradition that used Negro dialect; his predecessors included Mark Twain, Joel Chandler Harris, and George Washington Cable.

## ***Critical response and legacy***

Dunbar became the first African-American poet to earn nation-wide distinction and acceptance. The *New York Times* called him "a true singer of the people — white or black." In his preface to *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1931) writer and activist James Weldon Johnson criticized Dunbar's dialect poems for fostering stereotypes of blacks as comical or pathetic and reinforcing the restriction that blacks write only scenes of plantation life.

Writer Maya Angelou called her autobiographical book *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) after a line from Dunbar's poem "Sympathy" at the suggestion of jazz musician and activist Abbey Lincoln. Angelou named Dunbar an inspiration for her "writing ambition" and uses his imagery of a caged bird like a chained slave throughout much of her writings. In 2002, Molefi Kete Asante listed Paul Laurence Dunbar on his list of 100 Greatest African Americans.

## Lesson Development:

1. **Motivation (Word Spill):** Write the word “MASK” in large letters on the board or overhead. Ask students to call out the connotations or associations they have with this word. To help encourage a variety of thoughtful answers, it may be helpful to ask guiding questions such as: What are some reasons for wearing a mask? What are some different types of masks? How can masks help people? How do masks serve different purposes? How can masks harm or hinder people? How is “mask” used as different parts of speech (noun, adjective, verb)? Ask students to make observations about the responses to the word spill. Do they see any patterns, themes, or categories?
2. Taking into account student responses, make a chart on the board or overhead next to the “word spill” that helps emphasize some of the patterns or distinctions students identify. A possible chart might look like:

POSITIVE CONNOTATIONS	NEGATIVE CONNOTATIONS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Celebration and fun (Halloween, Mardi Gras, “masked ball”)</li> <li>• Protection and safety from harmful chemicals or emotional pain</li> <li>• Creativity and artistic self-expression</li> <li>• Self-invention – you choose your own identity</li> <li>• Superheroes (Batman, Zorro, etc.)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hiding who you really are</li> <li>• Shame</li> <li>• Superficiality or phoniness</li> <li>• Fear of being identified, exposed, threatened</li> <li>• Hiding your feelings about something</li> </ul>

It is important to remember that student responses will vary, and some connotations may fit into both categories, or neither, category. Continue to encourage students to justify why one list item should be placed in a particular category and to share diverse perspectives.

3. Review the terms “symbolism,” “literal,” and “figurative” (see vocabulary) and explain that a literal “mask” can **symbolize** all or any of the themes listed above.
4. Ask students: How might the concept of “masks” we’ve explored symbolize some of the triumphs and challenges of African-Americans after slavery? During the Civil Rights Era? Today? Allow students to discuss briefly and share responses. Jot down answers on board or transparency. Explain that the poet Paul Laurence Dunbar examined many of these ideas in his poetry.
5. Read as a class **Student Resource Sheet 1: Paul Laurence Dunbar Biography** and briefly highlight any connections between Dunbar’s own life and student responses for #3.
6. Set a purpose for reading by telling students to listen to how Dunbar uses the word “mask” figuratively in his poem. Have students read **Student Resource Sheet 2: “We Wear the Mask”** as a class. Choose one strong reader to read the poem out loud, and instruct the entire class to read the lines along with the student. You may also want to refer to the University of Dayton website listed under “Materials” and play the audio recording of the poem. For readers who need support, chunk the poem by stopping to discuss after each stanza and encouraging students to annotate in the margins and between the lines of the poem.
7. Ask students which “point of view” (1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, or 3<sup>rd</sup> person) Dunbar used in the poem to guide understanding of Dunbar’s purpose in speaking for his people and community. Encourage students to comment on the significance of the 1<sup>st</sup> person plural. Emphasize Dunbar’s intention to speak as a voice of his people and community. Ask students how the “choral reading” of the repeated lines helped emphasize his purpose, and briefly discuss.
8. Hand out **Student Resource Sheet 3: “We Wear the Mask” by Paul Laurence Dunbar Symbolism Worksheet**. Using transparency made from the chart, model completion of it with ONE example from each category *The Mask* and *Underneath the Mask*. Ask students how Dunbar describes the mask that African-

Americans wear. Encourage students to jump in anywhere in the poem and find ONE quality of *The Mask* – a line, phrase, image. Record the direct quotation from text in chart under *Qualities of The Mask: Quoted Lines from Text*. Then ask for a student volunteer to explain what this quality might mean in relation to the experience(s) of the African-American “we” in Dunbar’s poem. Jot down student’s response in chart under *Qualities of The Mask: Explanation/Response*. Encourage personal responses and a diversity of interpretations. See possible responses on **Teacher Resource Sheet 1: Symbolism Worksheet**.

9. Proceed similarly with the second category *Qualities Underneath the Mask*. Have class jot down student volunteer’s responses as teacher transcribes on transparency of worksheet. See possible responses on Symbolism Worksheet Sample Responses **Teacher Resource Sheet 1: Symbolism Worksheet**.
10. Divide students into groups of 3 or 4, and have them complete the Symbolism Worksheet. Encourage them to share opinions and listen to all perspectives, even though they need not come to a consensus or write the same responses on their individual charts.
11. Have groups share responses from their charts with the class and continue to jot down on transparency and encourage discussion of specific lines and images. Emphasize Dunbar’s use of diction and connotation – “grin” vs. “smile,” or “hides” vs. “shades.”
12. Hand out **Student Resource Sheet 4: Group Analysis Response Sheet** and have students discuss and jot down responses for class discussion. After groups have completed all responses, ask each group to present their responses to the class. Make a “master list” on the board or on a transparency of the groups’ symbolic interpretations of “the mask.” Encourage students to use textual evidence from their sheets to support their ideas. Return to the original word spill and reflect/revise ideas based on the poem.
13. Remind students that Dunbar’s use of rich language and symbolism is prevalent throughout his work. Share examples. Just as for “masks” write the word “cage” on the board and lead another class word spill around this word. To transition from “masks” to “cages,” ask students how cages are similar to and different from masks.
14. Ask students, based on their prior knowledge of slavery, Reconstruction, Civil Rights, and their recent experience with Dunbar’s biography and poem, what symbolic meanings “cages” might have for African-Americans during Dunbar’s time.
15. Hand out **Student Resource Sheet 5: “Sympathy”** and **Student Resource Sheet 6: “Sympathy” Group Analysis Response Sheet**. After leading a “choral reading” as in the previous poem, have students complete Response Sheet in (new) small groups. During and after reading, chunk the poem by stopping to discuss after each stanza and encouraging students to annotate in the margins and between the lines of the poem. Model one response on transparency from **Teacher Resource Sheet 1: Symbolism Worksheet** for possible responses, and circulate to assess and help guide discussion. Students may recognize the refrain as the title for Maya Angelou’s memoir *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. You may also want to refer to the University of Dayton website listed under “Materials” and play the audio recording of the poem.
16. Have groups briefly share their responses from **Student Resource Sheet 4: Group Analysis Response Sheet** with the class. Answers will vary. Close the discussion by asking students to comment on the title of the poem. Encourage students to identify and analyze what aspects of the struggle against racism Dunbar’s “bird” symbolizes, as this will be the focus of their individual ECR assessment.
17. **Assessment:** Have students complete **Student Resource Sheet 7: Short Essay Assignment**. Allow students to use any resource sheets and class notes for this activity.
18. **Closure:** After teacher evaluation of the short essays, have students share their responses in small group discussions. In addition, assign one of the creative writing LESSON EXTENSIONS to allow students to demonstrate their personal responses to themes and their skill with using symbolism.

## Thoughtful Application(s):

- This lesson may also be used in the study of Frederick Douglass since the two authors were contemporaries. Before studying Douglass' work, encourage students to research his life and make note of the connections to the Baltimore area. Also, ask students to find similarities and differences between Dunbar's and Douglass' lives using a Venn diagram. The students may compare Douglass' use of narrative and Dunbar's use of poetry.
- The lesson may be used also in units on the pre-Civil War, Civil Rights, post-Civil Rights, and Obama's Post-Racial culture of today to examine the symbolic masks and cages of each time period.

## Lesson Extensions:

- Complete a journal about a "personal mask" using the following prompt: Describe a "mask" that you wear in your own life, or that you observe in the world around you. Think carefully about our initial discussions of the multiple connotations of the word "mask." Your mask can be a positive, negative force in your life – or it can be both! Explain what your mask symbolizes, and what purpose it fulfills for you.
- Complete a journal about a "personal cage" using the following prompt: Describe a "cage" that you have experienced in your own life, or that you observe in the world around you. Think carefully about our initial discussions of the multiple connotations of the word "cage." Explain what your cage symbolizes, and what purpose it fills for you.
- Design an artistic "mask" or "cage" that echoes some of the same themes or ideas from Dunbar's poems using construction paper and other materials. Have students present their works of art to the class, and display them around the room while working on the Dunbar poems.
- Write an original poem about your personal mask or cage, using symbolism, imagery, and powerful diction to express your unique vision.
- Read additional poems by Paul Laurence Dunbar and compare them with "We Wear the Mask" and "Sympathy."
- Investigate historical background of Dunbar's world and write an argument essay that defends which events led to Dunbar's feelings expressed in his poetry. Then, investigate other historical eras and describe how "masks" in these eras are similar to and different from Dunbar's.
- Research other writers or artists who communicate similar themes expressed in Dunbar's poems. Create a PowerPoint, Prezi, Glogster, or other technological tool to create a presentation showing the themes in art or writing.
- Visit the Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History and Culture. View displays of Maryland's African American Freedom Writers. Write a description of an artifact or story in the museum that could represent the "masks" or "cages" that Dunbar describes. Connect his poems to the artifact or story.
- Read Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's antislavery poem, "Bury Me in a Free Land." Compare her style of poetry with that of Paul Lawrence Dunbar.
- Examine poems from the modern poets JaHipster and Lucille Clifton. What messages are being communicated in these poems? Would Paul Laurence Dunbar identify with these poets? Explain why or why not.

- The Museum offers several school programs that connect to the curriculum lessons.
  - *Journey in History Theatre* provides living history and theatrical performances which highlight African Americans in the museum's gallery.
  - Take the theme tour, *Heritage* and experience the rich, cultural heritage of Maryland's African American community. Learn how African Americans established and influenced Maryland's historic communities, social organizations, work traditions and artistic customs.
  - Contact group reservations for schedule updates.

# Teacher Resource Sheet 1

## “WE WEAR THE MASK” SYMBOLISM WORKSHEET SAMPLE RESPONSES

QUALITIES OF “THE MASK”		QUALITIES UNDERNEATH “THE MASK”	
Quoted lines from text	Explanation/Response	Quoted lines from text	Explanation/Response
“We wear the mask that grins and lies,”	African-Americans may need to grin (which is a little more reluctant and aware than just a smile) to work towards gaining equality. They need to secure employment, and work with the very people who discriminate against them. “Grin” also implies a sense of pride, strength, and dignity. However, it is also a “lie” to deny the truth of history.	“With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,”	In reality, the inner souls of the “we” in the poem have been abused and attacked with the cruelty of slavery, prejudice, and discrimination. This image also describes the physical abuse and destruction many African-Americans suffered during this time. However, it’s important to note that the heart is not completely destroyed. It still has its life, and the power to “smile.” This may be for the benefit of outsiders, as well as for the owners of the “hearts” themselves.
“It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes”	Cheeks and eyes give faces their individuality. African-Americans had to be “on guard” in white society, but this mask can also help unite them.	“Why should the world be otherwise, In counting all our tears and sighs?”	“Otherwise” seems to mean “knowing too much.” The “world” could imply the dominant white society having had control over the lives of African-Americans, even after slavery ended. Although there is pain and disappointment, the “we”/African-Americans aren’t going to allow white society access to their painful experiences and struggles.
“We smile, ...”		“...but, O great Christ, our cries To thee from tortured souls arise.”	Here the “we” invokes Christ, to underscore the desperation and horror of slavery, but also to emphasize the devotion, faith, and united spirit the former slaves shared. The rhyme of “cries” and “arise” further illuminates this, as something negative is transformed into something triumphant.
“We sing...”	Singing suggests a show of happiness – another forced or faked quality coming from the mask. However, it also suggests the powerful role of songs during the period of slavery. Songs were triumphant because they expressed hope, pain, history, and provided vital communication about escape.	“...but oh the clay is vile Beneath our feet, and long the mile;”	Even though there is singing, the reality is harsh and unforgiving. The “we” in the poem understands the long and treacherous road to freedom and equality.

## Teacher Resource Sheet 2

### “SYMPATHY” GROUP ANALYSIS RESPONSE SHEET

	STANZA 1	STANZA 2	STANZA 3
What is the state of mind of the caged bird in this stanza? Explain briefly, and list words, images, or lines that support your answer.	<p>Longing for the promise of freedom, spring, and renewal</p> <p>“sun is bright” “river flows” “first bird sings”</p>	<p>Conveys a sense of frustration and indignation. The bird is reacting to injustice, but must “fly back” to his “perch.”</p>	<p>The bird may feel hopeless and silenced, and sends his cry to heaven. Student responses will vary on whether this is hopeful (belief in a higher purpose, afterlife, spiritual purpose) or dejected (feeling helpless to change the “here and now”</p>
How does the caged bird described in the stanza connect to the experiences of African-Americans during Dunbar’s time?	<p>Like the caged bird, African-Americans face discrimination and racism, and feel excluded from participating in the political, social, and economic culture of the country</p>	<p>Many writers, politicians, educators, and thinkers are speaking out, yet racism and discrimination still pervade the society.</p>	<p>Student responses will vary based on individual interpretation (see above).</p>
Which one single piece of diction (word) is most powerful to you in this stanza? Why?	<p>Students responses will vary</p>	<p>Students responses will vary</p>	<p>Students responses will vary</p>

# Student Resource Sheet 1

## PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR BIOGRAPHY

### Historical Background:

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Dunbar's parents, Joshua and Matilda, began having marital problems a few months after their son's birth. After the birth of her daughter, who was ignored by Joshua, Matilda took the children, including two from a previous marriage, and left him. Joshua died in 1884 when Dunbar was 12 years old.

Dunbar was the only African-American student during the years he attended Dayton's Central High School, and he participated actively as a student. During high school, he was both the editor of the school newspaper and class president, as well as the president of the school literary society. He wrote his first poem at age six and gave his first public recital at age nine. His mother Matilda assisted him in his schooling, having learned how to read expressly for that purpose. She often read the Bible with him and thought he might become a minister for the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

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Though he credited William Dean Howells with promoting his early success, Dunbar was dismayed by his demand that he focus on dialect poetry. Angered that editors refused to print his more traditional poems, he accused Howells of "[doing] my irrevocable harm in the dictum he laid down regarding my dialect verse." Dunbar, however, was continuing a literary tradition that used Negro dialect; his predecessors included Mark Twain, Joel Chandler Harris, and George Washington Cable.

### *Critical response and legacy*

Dunbar became the first African-American poet to earn nation-wide distinction and acceptance. The *New York Times* called him "a true singer of the people — white or black." In his preface to *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1931) writer and activist James Weldon Johnson criticized Dunbar's dialect poems for fostering stereotypes of blacks as comical or pathetic and reinforcing the restriction that blacks write only scenes of plantation life.

Writer Maya Angelou called her autobiographical book *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) after a line from Dunbar's poem "Sympathy" at the suggestion of jazz musician and activist Abbey Lincoln. Angelou named Dunbar an inspiration for her "writing ambition" and uses his imagery of a caged bird like a chained slave throughout much of her writings. In 2002, Molefi Kete Asante listed Paul Laurence Dunbar on his list of 100 Greatest African Americans.

## Student Resource Sheet 2

# WE WEAR THE MASK

Paul Laurence Dunbar

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 otherwise,  
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!

[http://en.wikisource.org/w/index.php?title=We\\_Wear\\_The\\_Mask&oldid=3800547](http://en.wikisource.org/w/index.php?title=We_Wear_The_Mask&oldid=3800547)

## Student Resource Sheet 3

### “WE WEAR THE MASK” by Paul Laurence Dunbar SYMBOLISM WORKSHEET

QUALITIES OF “THE MASK” <i>characteristics or functions of the mask</i>		QUALITIES UNDERNEATH “THE MASK”	
Quoted lines from text	Explanation/Response	Quoted lines from text	Explanation/Response

## Student Resource Sheet 4

### “WE WEAR THE MASK” by Paul Laurence Dunbar GROUP ANALYSIS RESPONSE SHEET

**Directions:** After carefully reading and discussing Dunbar’s poem, discuss the following questions with your group members. Choose a “recorder” to write the group’s response to each question. Spend a few minutes in thoughtful discussion before the recorder begins to write, and remember to refer to your Symbolism Worksheet as you discuss. Your answers should reflect the opinions and interpretations of all group members. Contradictions are allowed!

1. What specific ideas or themes does “the mask” symbolize in Dunbar’s poem? Provide a few examples to support your ideas.
2. Is “the mask” a positive, negative, or neutral symbol in the poem? Explain with specific examples and thoughts about the text.
3. Describe the rhyme scheme Dunbar uses in his poem. What effect does the rhyme have on the poem? Would the poem’s meaning or intensity change if it did not rhyme? Explain.
4. How might this poem be relevant to our contemporary society? Explain, providing specific examples.

## Student Resource Sheet 5

### SYMPATHY

Paul Laurence Dunbar

I KNOW what the caged bird feels, alas!

When the sun is bright on the upland slopes;  
When the wind stirs soft through the springing grass,  
And the river flows like a stream of glass;

When the first bird sings and the first bud opens,  
And the faint perfume from its chalice steals--  
I know what the caged bird feels!

I know why the caged bird beats his wing

Till its blood is red on the cruel bars;  
For he must fly back to his perch and cling  
When he fain would be on the bough a-swing;

And a pain still throbs in the old, old scars  
And they pulse again with a keener sting--  
I know why he beats his wing!

I know why the caged bird sings, ah me,

When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore,--  
When he beats his bars and he would be free;  
It is not a carol of joy or glee,

But a prayer that he sends from his heart's deep core,  
But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings--  
I know why the caged bird sings!

[http://en.wikisource.org/w/index.php?title=Sympathy\\_\(Dunbar\)&oldid=3800542](http://en.wikisource.org/w/index.php?title=Sympathy_(Dunbar)&oldid=3800542)

## Student Resource Sheet 6

### “SYMPATHY” GROUP ANALYSIS RESPONSE SHEET

	STANZA 1	STANZA 2	STANZA 3
What is the state of mind of the caged bird in this stanza? Explain briefly, and list words, images, or lines that support your answer.			
How does the caged bird described in the stanza connect to the experiences of African-Americans during Dunbar’s time?			
Which one single piece of diction (word) is most powerful to you in this stanza? Why?			

## **Student Resource Sheet 7**

### **“SYMPATHY” SHORT ESSAY ASSIGNMENT**

How does Paul Laurence Dunbar use symbolism in his poem “Sympathy?” Explore how the symbolism contributes to the overall meaning of the poem.

Support your analysis with specific examples from the text. Be sure that your paragraph is fully developed, that it is logically organized, and that your choice of words expresses your ideas clearly.