Mask symbolism and social oppression in paul laurence dunbar's we wear the mask

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ABSTRAK

Puisi *We Wear the Mask* karya Paul Laurence Dunbar merepresentasikan pengalaman emosional dan sosial kelompok terpinggirkan di bawah tekanan sosial. Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis simbol topeng sebagai representasi konflik antara *public persona* dan *true self*, serta kaitannya dengan penindasan sosial. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan deskriptif kualitatif dengan analisis tekstual. Data diperoleh melalui *close reading* terhadap teks puisi dan didukung kajian teori simbolisme, identitas sosial, serta kritik sastra. Analisis dilakukan secara kontekstual dengan mengaitkan unsur intrinsik puisi dan kondisi sosial-historis. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa topeng berfungsi sebagai metafora identitas sosial yang dibentuk oleh tekanan eksternal, di mana individu menyembunyikan penderitaan batin melalui ekspresi yang tampak bahagia. Penggunaan kata "we" menegaskan sifat kolektif dan sistemik dari pengalaman tersebut. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa puisi ini memiliki relevansi universal dalam menggambarkan performativitas identitas dan penindasan emosional dalam kehidupan sosial modern.
Kata Kunci: simbolisme topeng; *public persona*; *true self*; penindasan sosial; Paul laurence dunbar

ABSTRACT

Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem "We Wear the Mask" represents the emotional and social experiences of marginalized groups under social pressure. This study aims to analyze the symbol of the mask as a representation of the conflict between the public persona and the true self, and its relationship to social oppression. The study uses a qualitative descriptive approach with textual analysis. Data were obtained through close reading of the poem's text and supported by studies of theories of symbolism, social identity, and literary criticism. The analysis was conducted contextually by linking the intrinsic elements of the poem with socio-historical conditions. The results show that the mask functions as a metaphor for social identity formed by external pressure, where individuals hide inner suffering through seemingly happy expressions. The use of the word "we" emphasizes the collective and systemic nature of the experience. This study concludes that this poem has universal relevance in depicting the performativity of identity and emotional oppression in modern social life.
Keyword: mask symbolism; public persona; true self; social oppression; Paul Laurence Dunbar

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1. INTRODUCTION

Literature functions as a medium through which social experiences and human conditions are represented and interpreted. Literary texts enable writers to articulate inner struggles, social pressures, and lived realities that often remain unspoken in everyday discourse. Among various literary forms, poetry occupies

a distinctive position due to its ability to convey complex emotional and social meanings through concise expression, symbolism, and figurative language.

Paul Laurence Dunbar is widely recognized as a significant figure in African-American literature whose works reflect the lived experiences of Black communities during periods of racial discrimination and social inequality in the United States. His poetry frequently portrays the tension between individuals and a society that demands emotional restraint and social conformity. One of his most widely discussed poems, *We Wear the Mask*, depicts how marginalized individuals conceal their true emotions behind socially acceptable appearances. Although written in the late nineteenth century, the poem remains relevant and continues to attract scholarly attention in contemporary literary studies (Morgan, 2011).

This study examines *We Wear the Mask* as a literary representation of the conflict between *public persona* and *true self*. The symbol of the "mask" functions as a metaphor for the division between outward expressions shaped by social expectations and inner emotional reality. Through this perspective, the poem reflects social conditions that enforce emotional suppression and identity control as strategies for survival within oppressive structures (Rhea, 2021).

Previous studies on *We Wear the Mask* have primarily focused on historical background and racial context. However, analyses that emphasize the conflict between *public persona* and *true self* as a form of emotional suppression remain limited. This gap highlights the need for further examination that foregrounds emotional experience and identity conflict as central elements of meaning (McLean, 2015).

Based on this background, this study addresses the following research questions: (1) how is the symbol of the mask used to represent the conflict between *public persona* and *true self*; (2) in what ways does the poem reflect social oppression experienced by marginalized communities; and (3) how does Dunbar employ poetic devices to convey collective suffering. Using a qualitative textual analysis approach, this study aims to provide a deeper understanding of how *We Wear the Mask* represents social experience and identity conflict through poetic expression.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Symbolism in Poetry

Symbolism is a fundamental element in poetry that enables poets to convey complex and abstract meanings through concrete images (Abrams, 1999). In *We Wear the Mask*, Paul Laurence Dunbar employs the image of the mask as a dominant symbol representing emotional concealment, psychological repression, and survival within restrictive social conditions. This symbolism is explicitly introduced in the opening lines:

"We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes."

The mask symbolizes a deceptive exterior that conceals authentic emotion. Although a smile traditionally signifies happiness, Dunbar subverts this association by linking it to falsehood and disguise. In line with Abrams (1999), symbols in poetry often reveal the tension between appearance and reality, which is reflected in the phrase "grins and lies" as an indication of imposed expression rather than genuine feeling.

Furthermore, the symbolism of the mask extends beyond individual experience to collective identity. The repeated use of the pronoun "we" indicates that emotional concealment is a shared condition. This suggests that symbolism in Dunbar's poem not only represents personal struggle but also functions as a medium for expressing collective suffering shaped by social pressure.

B. Public Persona and Identity Construction

The construction of *public persona* is closely related to the idea that identity is often performed according to social expectations rather than freely expressed. Dunbar's poem illustrates this concept through the metaphor of the mask as a performed identity, as seen in the lines:

"Why should the world be over-wise,
In counting all our tears and sighs?"

These lines suggest a deliberate decision to withhold authentic emotional expression from the public sphere. The speakers imply that revealing inner suffering may lead to further vulnerability. This perspective aligns with Erving Goffman's (1959) theory of *self-presentation*, which explains how individuals regulate outward behavior to conform to social norms and avoid negative judgment.

The tension between *public persona* and inner identity is further emphasized in the line:

"With torn and bleeding hearts we smile."

Here, the smile represents socially acceptable behavior, while the "torn and bleeding hearts" symbolize suppressed emotional reality. This contrast highlights the psychological cost of maintaining a socially constructed identity. Thus, identity formation in oppressive contexts can be understood as a continuous process of emotional regulation and concealment.

C. Social Oppression in African-American Literature

Social oppression is a central theme in African-American literature, often portrayed through metaphors that express endurance and resistance. In *We Wear the Mask*, Dunbar situates emotional repression within the broader context of systemic racial injustice, as illustrated in the lines:

"This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile."

The phrase "debt we pay" implies an obligation imposed by society rather than a voluntary choice. This indicates that wearing the mask functions as a survival strategy shaped by unequal power relations. Gates and McKay (1997) argue that African-American literature frequently reveals how oppression influences both outward behavior and inner emotional life, a concept reflected in Dunbar's portrayal of enforced emotional restraint.

Moreover, Dunbar introduces a spiritual dimension to emphasize the weight of oppression:

"But let the world dream otherwise,
We wear the mask!"

The repetition of this statement conveys resignation and endurance, suggesting that marginalized communities are compelled to conceal their suffering from dominant society. This reinforces the idea that the oppression depicted in the poem is systemic and historically rooted within the African-American experience.

D. Previous Studies on We Wear the Mask

Previous studies on *We Wear the Mask* have primarily focused on emotional concealment, collective identity, and psychological survival. These interpretations are supported by Dunbar's use of plural pronouns and collective imagery, as seen in the lines:

"Nay, let them only see us, while
We wear the mask."

This expression reflects *performative visibility*, where outward appearance is carefully controlled while inner reality remains hidden. Smith (2003) argues that such performativity functions as a strategic response to racial hostility, enabling marginalized individuals to navigate oppressive environments.

In addition, psychological interpretations emphasize the emotional consequences of sustained concealment, particularly in the lines:

"We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries
To thee from tortured souls arise."

This passage reveals a contrast between public composure and private suffering. Williams (2015) interprets this as evidence of internalized trauma resulting from prolonged social repression.

However, existing studies tend to examine symbolism, identity, and oppression as separate aspects. This study seeks to synthesize these elements by arguing that the recurring symbol of the mask unifies them into a single representation of collective suffering, thereby offering a more integrated interpretation of the poem.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

A. Research Design

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach to analyze Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem *We Wear the Mask*. This approach is appropriate because the study aims to describe and interpret literary meaning rather than produce numerical data. Through this design, the poem is examined as a text that represents symbolic meaning, identity conflict, and social oppression.

The descriptive qualitative method enables the researcher to explore how the symbol of the mask represents the tension between *public persona* and *true self*. The mask is introduced in the opening lines:

"We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—
This debt we pay to human guile;"

These lines indicate a distinction between outward expression and inner emotional reality. Therefore, this method is considered suitable for interpreting the symbolic and social meanings embedded in the poem.

B. Research Approach

This study applies literary analysis and social analysis integratively. Literary analysis is used to examine intrinsic elements of the poem, including symbolism, metaphor, diction, repetition, and figurative language. These elements help explain how the mask functions as a metaphor for dual identity.

For example, the line:

"With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties."

shows the contrast between inner suffering and outward expression. This contrast reinforces the conflict between *true self* and *public persona*.

Social analysis is used to understand the relationship between the symbol of the mask and the social reality of oppression experienced by marginalized groups. This can be seen in the lines:

"Why should the world be over-wise,
In counting all our tears and sighs?"

These lines suggest that the suffering of oppressed groups is hidden from public view. Thus, the poem is read not only as an aesthetic literary work but also as a social critique of injustice and marginalization.

C. Data Source

The primary data source of this study is the complete text of Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem *We Wear the Mask*. The poem is analyzed textually to identify symbols, themes, and linguistic patterns, and contextually to understand the social meanings represented in the text.

The secondary data consist of books, journal articles, and literary criticism related to symbolism, *public persona*, *true self*, African-American literature, and social oppression. These sources are used to support and strengthen the interpretation of the poem.

D. Data Collection Techniques

The data were collected through *close reading* and literature review. *Close reading* was conducted by reading the poem repeatedly and carefully to identify significant words, images, symbols, and poetic devices. This technique helps reveal both explicit and implicit meanings in the poem.

For instance, the lines:

"We sing, but oh the clay is vile
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;"

are examined to reveal the irony between outward endurance and the harsh reality experienced by the speakers.

In addition, the literature review was conducted by examining relevant theories and previous studies on symbolism, identity construction, and social oppression. This step provides a theoretical foundation for interpreting the poem more critically.

E. Data Analysis Technique

The collected data were analyzed using interpretative textual analysis. This technique emphasizes the interpretation of textual meaning by connecting the poem's intrinsic elements with its social and historical context.

The analysis was conducted through several stages. First, the poem was read repeatedly to identify recurring symbols and emotional patterns. Second, key themes were coded, including hidden identity, *public persona*, *true self*, emotional suppression, and social oppression. Third, the selected lines were interpreted contextually by relating them to the experiences of marginalized communities. Finally, the findings were synthesized with relevant literary and social theories to answer the research questions.

Through these stages, the study explains how the symbol of the mask functions as a representation of identity conflict and collective suffering in *We Wear the Mask*.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. The Mask as a Symbol of Public Persona

The mask in *We Wear the Mask* symbolizes a *public persona* deliberately constructed to conform to social expectations. This idea is introduced in the opening lines:

"We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,"

The phrase "grins and lies" indicates that the public identity presented to society is not only artificial but also deceptive. Smiling, in this context, becomes a performative act rather than a genuine emotional expression, reflecting social pressure to appear compliant and emotionally stable. This finding aligns with Erving Goffman's concept of *self-presentation*, where individuals regulate outward behavior to meet social expectations.

Furthermore, the mask conceals facial features associated with emotional authenticity. By "hiding the cheeks" and "shading the eyes," Dunbar emphasizes that social interaction often requires the suppression of genuine feelings. Thus, the mask functions not only as a symbol of deception but also as a protective social mechanism that allows individuals to navigate oppressive environments without exposing vulnerability.

B. True Self and Suppressed Suffering

Behind the constructed *public persona* lies the *true self*, characterized by emotional pain and psychological suffering. This hidden reality is expressed through paradoxical imagery:

"With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,"

This line presents a clear contrast between outward composure and inner anguish. The "torn and bleeding hearts" signify deep emotional wounds, while the act of smiling highlights the necessity of concealment. This supports previous interpretations that emotional suppression is not merely personal but structurally conditioned (Williams, 2015).

The suppression of emotion is further reinforced in the line:

"And mouth with myriad subtleties."

This phrase suggests controlled and indirect communication, where expression is carefully managed rather than openly conveyed. As a result, the *true self* becomes silenced, and emotional authenticity is sacrificed. This finding strengthens the argument that identity in the poem is constructed through continuous negotiation between internal reality and external expectations.

C. Collective Voice and Social Oppression

A significant feature of the poem is the consistent use of the pronoun "we," which positions the experience of wearing the mask as collective rather than individual:

"We wear the mask…"

This collective voice indicates that the suffering described is shared by a marginalized group, reinforcing the idea of systemic social oppression. The mask, therefore, represents not only individual concealment but also a broader social condition affecting entire communities. This interpretation is consistent with Gates and McKay (1997), who argue that African-American literature often reflects collective experiences shaped by structural inequality.

Dunbar further critiques this condition through a rhetorical question:

"Why should the world be over-wise,
In counting all our tears and sighs?"

This question highlights the imbalance of power between the oppressed and dominant society. It implies that emotional concealment is not a voluntary choice but a response to social constraints. Thus, silence becomes a form of enforced adaptation rather than individual preference.

D. Irony and Emotional Restraint

Irony plays a central role in expressing emotional depth in *We Wear the Mask*. While smiling is conventionally associated with happiness, Dunbar redefines it as a symbol of endurance and hidden suffering. This is evident in the lines:

"We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries
To thee from tortured souls arise."

These lines reveal a sharp contrast between public appearance and private anguish. Emotional expression is redirected from society to a spiritual domain, suggesting that individuals are denied safe spaces for authentic expression in social life. This supports the view that emotional repression operates within broader systems of power and control (Smith, 2003).

Additionally, the poem's restrained tone and controlled diction reinforce this condition. Rather than expressing resistance overtly, Dunbar employs subtle and measured language, reflecting internalized suppression. Therefore, emotional restraint emerges not as a weakness but as a survival strategy within oppressive social structures.

5. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Paul Laurence Dunbar's *We Wear the Mask* presents the mask as a powerful symbol of the separation between outward appearance and inner emotional reality. Through the use of the collective voice "we," Dunbar emphasizes that emotional masking is not merely individual but reflects a shared social condition shaped by pressure, expectation, and inequality.

The findings indicate that the mask functions not only as a form of deception but also as a survival mechanism within social environments that discourage emotional authenticity. Expressions such as smiling and politeness are constructed as acceptable social performances that conceal pain and suffering, revealing that identity is often formed through the negotiation between *public persona* and *true self*.

This study also highlights that, although rooted in the historical experience of African Americans, the poem conveys a universal relevance in describing emotional repression and identity performance across different social contexts.

Practically, these findings suggest the importance of creating social environments—particularly in educational and digital contexts—that support emotional openness and psychological well-being. Future research is recommended to explore similar themes of identity performance and emotional suppression in contemporary literary works or digital culture to expand the relevance of these findings.

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