

The Mask by Maya Angelou

Maya Angelou adapted the 1896 poem by Paul Laurence Dunbar, “We Wear the Mask,” in the following spoken-word poem.

We wear the mask that grins and lies.
It shades our cheeks and hides our eyes.
This debt we pay to human guile
With torn and bleeding hearts . . .
We smile and mouth the myriad subtleties.
Why should the world think otherwise
In counting all our tears and sighs.
Nay let them only see us while
We wear the mask.

We smile but oh my God
Our tears to thee from tortured souls arise
And we sing Oh Baby doll, now we sing . . .
The clay is vile beneath our feet
And long the mile
But let the world think otherwise.
We wear the mask.

When I think about myself
I almost laugh myself to death.
My life has been one great big joke!
A dance that’s walked a song that’s spoke.
I laugh so hard HA! HA! I almos’ choke
When I think about myself.

Seventy years in these folks’ world
The child I works for calls me girl
I say “HA! HA! HA! Yes ma’am!”
For workin’s sake
I’m too proud to bend and
Too poor to break
So . . . I laugh! Until my stomach ache
When I think about myself.
My folks can make me split my side
I laugh so hard, HA! HA! I nearly died
The tales they tell sound just like lying
They grow the fruit but eat the rind.

Hmm huh! I laugh uhuh huh huh . . .
Until I start to cry when I think about myself
And my folks and the children.

My fathers sit on benches,
Their flesh count every plank,
The slats leave dents of darkness
Deep in their withered flank.
And they gnarled like broken candles,
All waxed and burned profound.
They say, but sugar, it was our submission
that made your world go round.

There in those pleated faces
I see the auction block
The chains and slavery’s coffles
The whip and lash and stock.
My fathers speak in voices
That shred my fact and sound
They say, but sugar, it was our submission
that made your world go round.

They laugh to conceal their crying,
They shuffle through their dreams
They stepped ’n fetched a country
And wrote the blues in screams.
I understand their meaning,
It could an did derive
From living on the edge of death
They kept my race alive
By wearing the mask! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!¹

1. *Spoken-word poem adapted from “We Wear the Mask” by Paul Laurence Dunbar (1896).*
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