

Dunbar Annotated Poetry Analysis—"We Wear the Mask"

Before you read the poem, read the poet's biography. List three details that might influence the poem.

1. (Dunbar was the son of migrant African Americans)
2. (Dunbar adjusted his poetry to gain acceptance with white publishers)
3. (Dunbar wanted his poetry to be a voice for African American despair)

As you read the poem:     Underline words/phrases that relate to historical facts  
                                      Circle words/phrases that stir up emotions  
                                      Place a question mark next to ideas that you don't recognize and may need to research

After you read the poem, answer the following questions:

1. What historical background does a reader need to better understand this poem?

(Supreme Court—*Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) establishes doctrine of "separate but equal"—Jim Crow—segregation, racism)  
Jim Crow South- segregation, voting restrictions, convict lease system, lynching, share cropping, debt peonage  
Booker T. Washington's speech "The Atlanta Address" given in 1895 in response to lynchings in the South - advocates accommodation and education, Tuskegee Institute  
(White publishers controlled the content of African American writing)

2. How does this poem relate to migration? Refer to the historical context and text of the poem.

(Journey—parents to Dayton—Dunbar to Washington)  
(Push—racism of the South)  
(Pull—poetic/financial success of Washington)  
(Reception—segregation, racism, stereotyping, loss of literary freedom)  
(Adjustment—Dunbar had to write what would be published, at least at first)

3. Look at the words you circled as stirring up emotions. What emotions do those words make you feel? Are those emotions more negative, or more positive? Both?

(irony—mask that grins and lies, despair—torn and bleeding hearts, agony—cries from torn and bleeding Hearts—negative emotions)

4. Think about your responses to questions 2 and 3. What might the poet be persuading you to think about migration and migrants? Write your responses in a sentence.

(Dunbar wants the reader to be sickened by the irony of the stereotyped grins of African American migrants' masks)  
(Dunbar wants the reader to understand the despair of African Americans because of how they are treated, and how they must act in order to survive)  
(Dunbar wants his reader to feel the agony of African Americans in America)

5. Based on your analysis, write a sentence expressing the poet's message.

(Although African Americans may keep up a positive appearance, they have "tortured souls" and "torn

and bleeding hearts” as a result of the cruelties of racism and segregation.)

6. What did you learn by analyzing this poem?

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