

Masks and Minstrels

1 Day

High School American Literature/American Studies

DESIRED RESULTS:

What are the “big ideas” that drive this lesson?

- Mark Twain was influenced by minstrel shows in his youth and many commentators have noted that the stereotypical stock characters of the minstrel show have a resemblance to “Jim” in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (AHF)*.
- African American actors often portrayed these characters throughout the 19th century, with most using “blackface” just like their white counterparts in the same roles. While whites earned their pay by entertaining predominantly white audiences with their ridicule of African Americans, the motives for black performers doing the same thing were subtler, and underscore the uses of the “mask” as a theatrical concept that in its practical use has become a means of social defense.

What are the “essential questions” that students must answer in order to understand the “big ideas”?

- What are the possible motives for using a mask?
- During the 19th century, why did African Americans have to conceal their true thoughts and sentiments? What were the circumstances?
- Why would African-Americans willingly participate in something like blackface minstrelsy, which aims to denigrate their own culture?

CORE UNDERSTANDINGS:

Identify what students will know and/or be able to do.

- Students will be able to cogently explain why African Americans often employ masks in their artistic expressions.

SUGGESTED ASSESSMENTS:

- Completion of unit worksheet

LEARNING EXPERIENCES:

1. Introduce the lesson by first explaining minstrel shows (see enhancement suggestions) and the influence they had on Mark Twain and his characterization of “Jim” in *AHF*.
2. Distribute the poem “We Wear the Mask” (1896) [see below] and explain to the class that its writer, Paul Lawrence Dunbar, was one of the first well-known black poets in the United State. Note that it addresses the question of why African Americans would act in minstrel shows of the early-to-mid 19th Century.
3. Ask: why would the African Americans of that time submit to the indignity of minstrelsy? State clearly that this is the essential question that the students will try to answer during this class.
4. Ask: what is the use of a mask? Answers should include that masks can hide one’s identity and can also allow an individual to resemble someone else. Observe that whites participating in the minstrel shows entertained predominantly white audiences by making fun of people who were generally regarded as socially inferior; the function of these jokes was to allow whites to feel superior to blacks.
5. Tell them that while white actors used a form of mask in minstrelsy called “blackface”, created by applying black paint or burnt cork to their faces, Dunbar’s poem does not suggest that African Americans use makeup or an actual mask, which seems to contradict the title of the poem. How can that make sense?
6. Have the students read Dunbar’s poem, and complete the worksheet (see below). Be sure to note that Dunbar was the son of ex-slaves from Ohio. (In *AHF*, the Ohio River is Jim’s road to freedom, as it leads to the states that prohibit slavery.)
7. Once students have completed their work, have them discuss their answers with the class.

COMMON CORE CONNECTIONS:

- CCSS RSL. 11-12. 4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on the meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful.

MATERIALS AND ATTACHMENTS:

- “We Wear the Mask”, by Paul Dunbar (1872 – 1906)
- Worksheet: “Masks and Modern Minstrels”

SUGGESTED LESSON EXTENSIONS TO ENHANCE LEARNING

- Have students view the award-winning documentary *Ethnic Notions*, Marlon Riggs, 1987 (available from California Newsreel, 57 minutes), which sheds scholarly light on the origins and devastating consequences of seemingly innocent images and stereotypical roles that have a corrosive and dehumanizing effect on society.

Masks and Modern Minstrels

A) What emotion(s) do you think Dunbar is saying that African Americans should hide? From whom are they hiding it?

B) Now give 5 pieces of textual evidence from the poem to support your answer.

1) _____

2) _____

3) _____

4) _____

5) _____

C) Why would African Americans at this time need to hide how they really felt?

D) There's no doubt that some African Americans participated in making fun of their own race (and furthered the negative stereotypes associated with blackness as a result) because the minstrel shows paid them to do so. However, can you think of another reason why African Americans would willingly participate in minstrel shows? Use the poem as your guide to answer this question, even though you may need to branch off a little bit so that your answer is different from Section C.

G) Why do you think Dunbar ends his poem with an exclamation mark?

H) Modern-day Minstrel Shows and Masks:

Watch the following video clip about the “similarities” between various contemporary hip -hop artists and actual members of the minstrel show. Try to visualize a few of the images you remember. List three of these images/similarities below.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1kc4EwD5hoA>

WARNING—STRONG LANGUAGE IN THE BACKGROUND SONG!

Turn volume off—the images are appropriate

1) _____

2) _____

3) _____

I) Read the following two passages and answer the questions below.

1) “These days, camouflage is the new black. Hip-hop now operates on a single hope: that if the world mistakes kindness for weakness it can also be led to confuse meanness with strength.”

2) “That principle explains why there is a permanent reverence for the thug within the music; it is why there is a murderer’s grit and a jailhouse tattoo peering back at you from the cover of near any CD you picked up in the last five years. But what hip hop can’t tell you, the secret that it would just as soon take to its deathbed is that it this urban bravado is a guise, a mask, a head-fake to shake the reality of fear and powerlessness in America. Hip hop will never admit that our assorted thugs and gangstas are not the unbowed symbol of resistance to marginalization, but the most complacent and passive products of it.

“We wear the mask that scowls and lies.”

1) Paraphrase (put in your own words) what the first passage means.

2) What are hip-hop artists trying to hide with their mask of acting tough?

3) Do you agree with this author's view of their "masks"? If you do not, why do **you** believe that so many hip hop artists act so tough?

We Wear the Mask (1896)

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 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!