We Wear the Mask

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 over-wise,
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!

- Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906)

Questions:
1. What is the mask symbolic of in Paul Laurence Dunbar’s poem, “We Wear the Mask”?

2. Why doesn’t the speaker want the world to see “our tears and sighs”?

3. Why do you think the speaker hides his feelings? What types of feelings is he trying to hide?

4. What is lost and what is gained by hiding true feelings?

5. What about the ambiguity of the word "we?” Why do you think the speaker chooses to omit any specific identifiers?

6. What would you say is the THEME of this poem?