

Name: _____ Class: _____

Jabari Unmasked

By Nikki Grimes
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Nikki Grimes is an African American author, poet, and journalist. Grimes is well known for her award-winning books written for children and young adults. This poem appeared in her book One Last Word, a collection inspired by poems from the Harlem Renaissance that follow the "Golden Shovel" form. In this poetic form, the poet takes a "striking line" from an inspirational poem and uses words from that inspirational line or stanza in a new poem. The striking line then appears, word for word, at the end of the lines in the new poem. This poem uses the first stanza of Paul Laurence Dunbar's "We Wear the Mask," as a speaker describes why they conceal their identity. As you read, take notes on what and why the speaker is hiding from the world.

[1] Fresh out of middle school, **we**
 all understand the rules: **wear**
 whatever's in, scowl on cue to convince **the**
 world we're fearless — anything to **mask**
[5] the million insecurities **that**
 pockmark¹ our skin like acne. Gone the **grins**
 when we strut down the hall. We talk tough **and**
 hope to God it's enough to get us by. It's all **lies**.

[10] We despise the masquerade.² **It**
 may disguise our fears, but also **hides**
 our kind and tender hearts, **our**
 agile minds, the wit that sits behind our **cheeks**
 —
 who'd guess that some of us are geeks **and**
 nerds and poets, too? Clothed in **shades**
[15] of chocolate skin, our color works to camouflage
 our
 character and promise — at least, in certain **eyes**.

[20] One look, and we are neatly judged **this**
 gang, these thugs, these dark delinquents³ in
 debt
 to society. Meanwhile, you fail to see that **we**
 are college-bound (more than a few), prepared to
 pay
 attention to psychology, the sciences, the arts, **to**
 thoughtfully unfurl the scrolls of **human**



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history. Instead, you see a thief who uses **guile**.⁴

1. to cover or disfigure with pockmarks, pitted scars or marks on the skin
2. a false show
3. a usually young person who regularly performs illegal or immoral acts
4. **Guile (noun):** the use of clever and usually dishonest methods to achieve something

[25]

Is such unfairness what the world is filled **with**?
The evidence is seen in spirits ripped and **torn**.
Still, the world needs the dreams we offer, **and**
should we leave those dreams **bleeding**
on the road, we'd shrink our own **hearts**
down to nothing, and that **we**

[30]

would regret. Better to let our anger go, and **smile**.

[35]

The ignorant ignore as best you can, **and**
in the end, mask aside, freshen your **mouth**
with ferocious lines of potent poetry, **with**
metaphors that mightily reveal the **myriad**⁵
of emotions you feel – yet, in all their **subtleties**.

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Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which of the following best identifies a theme of the poem? [RL.2]
 - A. People of color often hide their identity due to the negative expectations of society.
 - B. Children are often shamed for characteristics that make them unique or stand out.
 - C. Society often judges a person's worth and promise by the color of their skin.
 - D. People often don't contribute their ideas because they're too afraid to speak up.

2. PART B: Which quote from the poem best supports the answer to Part A? [RL.1]
 - A. "anything to mask / the million insecurities that / pockmark our skin like acne." (Lines 4-6)
 - B. "agile minds, the wit that sits behind our cheeks — / who'd guess that some of us are geeks" (Lines 12-13)
 - C. "One look, and we are neatly judged this / gang, these thugs, these dark delinquents" (Lines 17-18)
 - D. "we'd shrink our own hearts / down to nothing, and that we / would regret. Better to let our anger go, and smile." (Lines 28-30)

3. What does the phrase "our color works to camouflage our / character and promise — at least, in certain eyes" mean as it is used in the poem (Lines 15-16)? [RL.4]
 - A. The speaker and their peers wear dark colors in hopes of blending in.
 - B. People judge the speaker, and people like them, because of the color of their skin.
 - C. The kids hide their capabilities out of fear of what others will think of them.
 - D. People don't expect as much from the kids because of their young age.

4. PART A: How does the word choice in the last two stanzas of the poem contribute to the tone (Lines 24-35)? [RL.4]
 - A. It portrays the speaker's approach to the future as pessimistic.
 - B. It emphasizes the speaker's hope that things will improve.
 - C. It conveys the speaker's frustration at the injustice they experience.
 - D. It stresses the speaker's resigned tone towards the injustices described.

5. PART B: Which quote from the text best supports the answer to Part A? [RL.1]
 - A. "Is such unfairness what the world is filled with? / The evidence is seen in spirits ripped and torn." (Lines 24-25)
 - B. "Still, the world needs the dreams we offer, and / should we leave those dreams bleeding" (Lines 26-27)
 - C. "we'd shrink our own hearts / down to nothing, and that we / would regret." (Lines 28-30)
 - D. "in the end, mask aside, freshen your mouth / with ferocious lines of potent poetry" (Lines 32-33)

6. What does the “masquerade” represent in the poem (Line 9)?

[RL.3]

Discussion Questions

Directions: *Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.*

1. How do you relate to the experiences that Nikki Grimes describes in the poem? Do you think that the speaker's suggestion to use poetry to deal with oppression is a helpful one? Why or why not?

2. Can you change your identity? To what extent does the speaker change their identity?

3. In the context of the poem, why do people follow the crowd? Why does the speaker feel compelled to hide their identity or present it in a certain way? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.

4. In the context of the poem, what are the effects of prejudice? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.