

Poetry Lesson

Underface

Grade Level: 6-12

Time Frame: 60 minutes

Objective: Students will consider identity and self-presentation while writing poems that explore the concept of social masks.

Prior Knowledge and Skills: Grade level reading and comprehension

Required Materials: whiteboard and markers, paper and pencil, *Masks* and *Underface* by Shel Silverstein (provided in this lesson plan)

Sequence of Activities:

Introduction (10-15 min):

Engage students in an open-ended conversation on social masks. This is an opportunity to bring out their free-flowing thoughts, opinions, and personal storytelling. Below are some starting questions:

What kind of social masks do people wear?

Do you ever feel like you act or need to be different when meeting others?

What are your masks like?

Read and Discuss Literary Model (10 min):

Read the below poems. Students can volunteer or be asked to read aloud several times.

Masks by Shel Silverstein

She had blue skin,
And so did he.
He kept it hid
And so did she.
They searched for blue
Their whole life through,
Then passed right by-
And never knew.

Underface by Shel Silverstein

Underneath my outside face
There's a face that none can see.
A little less smiley,
A little less sure,
But a whole lot more like me

Collaborative Writing Prompts (10-15 min):

Write the below sentence starter on a large on a white board or sticky note. Ask students to think of what might exist beneath their outer expression or smile. We don't always feel the way we look – and sometimes we try to cover up how we feel or who we are.

Write down their ideas as they share aloud.

"Underneath my outside face
There's a _____"

Tips: Students can interpret the sentence literally or metaphorically. Some students may choose to lean into imagery while others choose to write in more direct statements. It doesn't matter, whatever gets their ideas flowing is totally acceptable. Occasionally pause and ask students to dig a little deeper into an idea or two. You might say "tell me more" or "what do you mean by that?" This brings out more storytelling from the students, and those narrative fragments can be incorporated into the collaborative program. Capture it all as a stream of thought and you will find that in sharing their thoughts aloud, one student's creativity will spark another's. In the best-case scenario, they become excited at the waterfall of ideas and possibilities.

Example of Collaborative Poem:

Underneath My Outside Face ***-after Shel Silverstein***

Underneath my outside face
there's a wall, a shyness
building up if I don't know anyone

Underneath my outside face
there's a happy baby
getting glasses for the first time
with the strap on the back

Underneath my outside face
there's a sadness
because there are some things that won't be going my way
even though I want them to

Underneath my outside face
there's a sleepiness
after a busy day of weaving
I sleep with my baby dolls
I rotate them

-written by students at [ArtWorks](#) in Tucson, Arizona

Individual Writing Prompt (10-15 min):

If students find their flow and get on a roll with the collaborative prompt, that's a good indication they might be ready for the individual prompt. On their own paper, invite them to write about their own social masks. When do they wear this mask? How do they behave when the mask is on? How do they behave when the mask is off? Have they ever felt totally maskless...that is, totally comfortable in their own skin and free to be who they are? What were they doing? Whom were they with and where? Ask them to write freely and without self judgement. It doesn't need to come out perfectly (revision can come later).

Optional Sharing or Art (10 min or continue in a follow-up session):

Save 10 minutes at the end of class for volunteers to share their poems. Writing about social masks means being vulnerable, so it's also okay if students aren't comfortable sharing. Another option is to draw or create a self-portrait – either of how they feel when wearing a mask or how they feel when not wearing a mask.

Side note: the assumption is sometimes that masks are bad. But it's possible to have a student write that they like their social mask(s) and what it does for them. Maybe they don't feel like it's a false identity at all but just another version of themselves applied to a different situation. There can be lots of room in this lesson for that perspective, too. Student discussion and poems might also choose to explore our many versions of self and identity. We are all, at any given moment, more than one thing. We are all incredibly complex beings.

Examples of Individual Poems:

When I wear my mask I am quiet, playing with my thumbs, taking my glasses off and on
By Jack McHugh

Behind my mask you'll find
I'm as chatty as a Kathy - I just make up stories

I turning on the oldies and sing out loud over my music
Sometimes I dance to the YMCA
When I'm alone, I eat a lot of Reese's Pieces, M+Ms, and Skittles - I always switch
I know when I'm myself because I start joking around - I joke around with my family and friends

The below poem by Ann combined her experience with masks and the pandemic with the idea of social masks:

COVID

By Anne Meacham

Behind my mask you'll find a shy cat, who is a tabby, with green eyes. With pink collar and a flower tag. Behind my mask you'll find a tired person. But when I am with other people I am awake. But I felt uncomfortable. I want to take it off. I'll put it on to feel safe and warm.