

IDENTITY PROBLEM OF AFRICAN AMERICANS AS SEEN IN LANGSTON HUGHES' "I, TOO" AND PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR'S "WE WEAR THE MASK"

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Abstract

This study is about the identity problem of African Americans in Langston Hughes' "I, Too" and Paul Dunbar's "We Wear the Mask". The objectives of the study are to find out the portrayal of identity problem in the poems and the poets' attitude and world view. The study employs sociological approach and Pricilla B.P Clark' literary sociology as the theory and library research as the method of collecting data. The results show that the racism faced by African Americans in America and their self-identification and position as American citizens have put them in identity problem. Meanwhile, the poets, though in different attitudes, have shown their optimism that the African Americans will not face racial discrimination and gain equality in the future.

Key words: identity problem, African Americans, racism, attitude, world view.

INTRODUCTION

As people always bother about differences they encounter in their lives, problems and conflicts always exist in their lives. They fuss over the differences in almost every aspect in life. Differences in race, ethnic groups, gender, economic and social status, religion, etc. might become the prominent sources of problem. Racism also has been a prevailing issue throughout the world and time span. Racism refers to the belief that some races of people are better than others and the unfair treatment of people that belong to a different race; violent behavior towards them (Hornby, 2000, p.1042). It is the belief that a certain race is better and superior that makes a certain race try to control and be dominant over others. History records people are persecuted, pursued, killed, subdued, imprisoned, simply because of their race or skin color. Racism has become and is a serious problem when it permeates a system.

America, that was claimed as the New World—a land to make a new life— was supposed to be a land of hope for every nation coming for better lives. It is regarded as a land of freedom, and a land where every immigrant can fulfill their dreams. Indeed, it has been a land of hope that gives better lives to the whites; it is a land that enables to make their dream come true. However, this is not the case for certain races in the land, like the Africans, Asians, and even the indigenous people of the land. For them, America is not a land that every white immigrant has claimed before.

The arrival of many immigrants from different races has definitely created conflicts socio-culturally. Competition also has occurred between a certain race with other certain races. It has created the whites as the majority and the dominant in the interaction and competition among the races. However, the white supremacy has created disaster to other counterparts because of the racist thinking they believe and behavior they do to them. The minorities, like the African Americans, Native Americans, Asians, have become the victims of such thinking and behavior.

The Blacks or African Americans are among those suffering longer than other races due to this racism. Beginning in 1619 when the Blacks arrived in Jamestown, they were purchased as bonded or indentured servants, with status that was not quite different from that of the whites. However, as time passed, the practice of indenturing the whited declined, the status of the African Americans also declined. They were entrapped in a bondage of slavery for centuries. Blackness turned to be the symbol of servitude. The system of slavery that in the United States during the eighteenth century deprived its victims of all human rights as the rules of servitude themselves became more restrictive (McLemore, 1983, p. 262).

Racism against the African Americans took centuries. The America's independence from the United Kingdom still did not make the Black Americans gained equality. Even the slave emancipation after the Civil War in 1863 did not make them equal to the white counterparts. No equal treatment was received by the African Americans even till the twentieth century. They instead received bad treatments both physically and psychologically due to their skin color. In short, they had to live in discriminatory life. This of course creates a question regarding their identity as American citizens.

Identity is concerned with who someone is. It is determined by the relation of someone with something else. According to MentalHelp.Net, in <https://www.mentalhelp.net/understanding-your-problem/self-identity/>, "people's identity is rooted in their identifications; in what they associated themselves with. What a person associates him or herself with is ultimately who that person is, for all identity is ultimately in relationship to something else. An American person identifies himself or herself as "American", for example, and that becomes part of that American person's identity."

Literature since long time ago has served as a means to portray human experiences, thoughts, feelings. It has been a record of human experiences, behaviour, thoughts, feelings, even the responses to their experiences. It is in accordance to what Wellek and Warren in *Theory of Literature* stated that "literature represents life, and life is, in large measure, a social reality, even though the natural world and the inner world of the subjective world have also been objects of literary imitation"(1977, p. 94).

In this study, the writer chooses two literary works to discuss, namely Paul Laurence Dunbar's "We Wear the Mask" and Langston Hughes' "I, Too". These two poets are prominent

poets living in 19th century and 20th century respectively. "We Wear Mask" was written in 1895, and "I, Too, in 1926. Both poems show the issue of identity problem due to racism; thus, this study intends to discuss it. In addition, the writers also wonder about the poets' attitude and world view to the issue through the speakers of the poems.

Regarding the studies conducted using the two poems as the objects of research, there is a study written by Mutia Irhamni from Department of English, Faculty of Cultural Sciences, University of Sumatera Utara entitled *The Struggle against Racism Reflected in Langston Hughes' Selected Poems*. The study reveals the racism and struggle against the racism in the poems, including "I, Too" using the theory of racism. Another study by Fajri Khaimara Utama, a student from English Department Faculty of Humanities Semarang, talks about *Racial Segregation in Langston Hughes's; "I, Too"* by analyzing its intrinsic and extrinsic elements. Meanwhile, a topic on racism and slavery, *Racialism Slavery as Reflected in Paul Lawrence Dunbar's Poems to Social Life*, has been written by Narlius Reinal Erianto, Mac Aditiawarman, Fetri Reni and was published in *Jurnal Ilmiah Langue and Parole*. The poems selected are "We Wear the Mask", "The Debt", "Sympathy", "Life's Tragedy and the Paradox". These studies focus on the racism and slavery happened to African Americans. This study is about the identity problem in Langston Hughes' "I. Too" and Paul Dunbar's "We Wear the Mask", looking into the poets' attitude on racism and their world views.

The study employs sociological approach because it discusses the work in relation to social reality, which is, racism and the impact of racism as seen in the two poems, "We Wear the Mask" by Paul Laurence Dunbar and "I, Too", by Langston Hughes. The theory used is literary sociology. Pricilla B.P Clark holds that literary sociology deals with the readings of literary texts from one critical sociological point of view (108). She points out that literary sociology is closer to literary criticism. There are different ways of connecting literary aspect of a work to its social aspect. One of them is considering the author of the literary work as "more or less active reproducer of social meaning, a maker as well as a product of social influences" (114). It means that an author makes comments on roles and possibilities of society he/she sees in real life (Langland 6). Literary work is not only a reflection of society, but it is more of a perspective or a worldview of its author. In this context, the poets are viewed as social beings who critically thought about or responded to his world where he grew up, who was influenced by his social interaction, and who wanted to define his role and position in his society. The society formed in a novel can include people and their classes, the customs, conventions, beliefs and values, the institutions (legal, religious and cultural) and physical environment (6).

In collecting the data, the writer uses library research to find the data to answer the research question. Close reading is employed to gather the data. The primary data are taken from Paul Laurence Dunbar's "We Wear Mask" and "I, Too", by Langston Hughes; meanwhile, the

secondary data are taken from other sources like articles, journals, books, and writings from library and internet. The writer uses descriptive analysis in analysing the data.

DISCUSSION ON IDENTITY PROBLEM OF AFRICAN AMERICANS AS SEEN IN THE TWO POEMS

The discussion the African Americans' identity problem cannot be separated from the discussion of racism, discrimination, and the suffering of the African Americans. Therefore, those topics are briefly discussed as they are the base of the discussion of the Black Americans identity problem.

This section provides brief information on the lives of African Americans starting from their arrival to America to their lives in the twentieth century. It serves as the information on how racism began to happen to the people so that they were enslaved and discriminated by the whites for centuries—such oppression that bring about the poets' responses in their poems. Even McLemore himself states that many of the modern problems of black Americans may be traced to the direct effect of slavery. (Mc Lemore, 1983, p. 268)

Position of African Americans

Citing from <https://www.mountvernon.org/education/primary-source-collections/primary-source-collections/article/the-declaration-of-independence-july-4-1776/>, the America's Declaration of Independence on July 14, 1776, states that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

According to <https://constitutioncenter.org/the-constitution/historic-document-library/detail/civil-rights-act-of-1866-april-9-1866-an-act-to-protect-all-persons-in-the-united-states-in-their-civil-rights-and-furnish-the-means-of-their-vindication> Civil Rights Act of 1866 declares that “ all persons born in the United States and not subject to any foreign power, excluding Indians not taxed, are hereby declared to be citizens of the United States; and such citizens, of every race and color, without regard to any previous condition of slavery or involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall have the same right, in every State and Territory in the United States....(2022, p. 1). These two legal documents themselves have provided strong sources of protection and equal rights to all Americans, including the freed African American slaves and their descendants.

A Brief Account on African American Experience

The Lives of the African Americans in Early America



The black people were among the first people that came to America. Twenty purchased black men, also their white counterparts, were brought to Virginia by a Dutch warship to the New World in Virginia in 1691 as indentured servants. (McLemore 1983). In in this case, there was possibility for the black men to be free men when the service term was over.

The condition of bonded servitude was certainly far different from freedom, but it gave the opportunity to start a new and better life after a specified number of years as free men. However, as time passed and black men labor proven to be more profitable both Maryland and Virginia made legal steps to make attainment of freedom more difficult for black slaves by 1660s. This continued to legalizing a lifetime slavery for blacks so that the ability of black person to gain his freedom ended in 1682 (McLemore, 1983).

African Americans hardships

In terms of life, slave life depends on many factors. According to <https://www.ushistory.org/us/27b.asp>, slave life varied greatly depending on many factors. Slaves that worked on the fields or plantations had to work from dawn to sundown six days a week. They did not get enough food, and when they did, the food was even not appropriate for an animal to consume. They lived in small shacks with a dirt floor and little or no furniture. When they lived in large plantations, they might face cruel overseers that gave them cruel treatments and punishments. However, living in small farm was also a problem as the owner might not be able to feed (2022). Meanwhile, the slaves that worked in the plantation home enjoyed better life as they got better food, lived in better quarters, and got the chance to travel with their owner's family. Slave codes were also developed in states in the South to shackle slaves' lives so that practically they did not have any freedom at all. Even worse, the slaves had no legal standing, they could be bought and sold at will. Families could be, and were broken apart and separated forever. Moreover, countless number of slaves were brutally beaten, maimed, or killed by ruthless masters or, more often, plantation overseers. The slaves simply had no control over their own lives. Slaves had, as the Supreme Court stated in the decisive Dred Scott case in 1857, "no rights that a white men need to respect." (McLemore, 1983, p. 263). Finally, the slavery had become a system that was really oppressive and cruel as the practice was very shocking and brutal. The system of slave control had resembled the total control of the twentieth-century concentration camp. Just as prisoners who are exposed to absolute power in concentration camps become psychologically debilitated, docile, and childlike, black American slaves also experienced profound personality disintegration. The psychological effects of slavery, indeed, afford a realistic underpinning for the so-called Sambo stereotype of the slave. This image of the typical personality of the black slave assumes he "was docile but irresponsible, loyal but lazy, humble but chronically given to lying and stealing (McLemore, 1983). It can be seen that slavery is indeed repressive and psychologically destructive.

Slave Emancipation

By late 1865, some million blacks lived in the United States and the Civil War (1861-1865) had freed approximately 90 percent of them. Extensive urbanization, technological change, industrial expansion, and intensive socioeconomic and political exploitation of working people, blacks and whites alike, occurred in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Yet, in comparison to the whites, African Americans faced greater restrictions on where they could work, live, play, travel, lodge, and eat; educate their children; receive medical treatment; bury their dead, and gain fair treatment in courts of law, popular media, and scholarly publications. The postbellum years saw discrimination against African Americans due to Jim Crow Law; they were political disfranchisement and economic subordination of African Americans, segregation within the housing, institutional, intellectual, and cultural life of the nation(Trotter, 2001).

With the passage of “Jim Crow legislation in 1880s and 1890s blacks were disfranchised in southern states, segregated in public accommodation and on common carriers, recreational facilities, prisons, armed forces, and curtailed in their access to due process of law. With the *Plessy vs Ferguson* decision of the U.S. Supreme Court in 1896, they were also segregated in public education. All of the legislation was enforced to make African Americans powerless, and became targets of white hostility.... Due to less skilled condition, African Americans were becoming more concentrated on than ever in agrarian labor, and domestic service (Hraba, 1980, p. 268). General labor, household, and domestic service occupations that required heavy lifting, loading, carrying, and cleaning emerged at the core of “Negro work.” In fifteen antebellum northern and southern cities, over 60 percent of free black men worked in jobs defined as unskilled, semiskilled, and personal service(Trotter 2001, p. 214).

This shows that emancipation of slaves does not bring significant changes to the lives of the African-Americans; they still have to live in predicament due to racism.

A Brief Account on the Poets' Lives

Paul Laurence Dunbar

According to <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/paul-laurence-dunbar#tab-poems> Paul Laurence Dunbar was born on June 27, 1872. His parents were Black slaves from Kentucky. He was regarded as one of the first influential Black poets in American literature, as he was internationally acclaimed for his dialectic verse in collections, such as *Majors and Minors* (1895) and *Lyrics of Lowly Life* (1896). However, he wrote not only poems—many poems in standard English, but also novels, short stories, essays. Importantly, Dunbar’s literary body has represented Black life in turn-of-the-century America.

In addition, his literary potential was obvious when he was in high school in Ohio, where he lived with his widowed mother. At that time, he had published poems in the *Dayton Herald*. He also became an editor of the short-lived *Dayton Tattler*, a Black newspaper published by a classmate. In fact, he had set his heart to pursue a career in law, but he could not make it as his mother did not have money for his education. Thus, he sought employment in business and newspaper only to get rejection because of his race. He finally settled working as an elevator operator; this job had given him time to continue writing. With the help of some prominent figures, he was able to publish his famous poem collection *Oak and Ivy* and then *Majors and Minors* in the following year, where he gained some reviews. There, he started to gain increasing fame. He also published short stories, novels, collection of tales and other verse collection. The experience of Blacks in pre-emancipation and post-emancipation had become topics in most of his works. Unfortunately, tuberculosis had caused his death in 1906 at the age of 33 (2022).

Meanwhile, according to <https://poets.org/poet/langston-hughes>, James Mercer Langston Hughes was born on February 1, 1901, in Joplin, Missouri. Until he was thirteen, he was raised by his grandmother because of his parents' divorce. He began writing poetry when he lived with his mother and her husband in Lincoln. Graduating from high school, he spent a year at Columbia University in New York City where he worked as assistant cook, launderer, and busboy. He also travelled to Africa and Europe working as a seaman. His first book of poetry, *The Weary Blues*, was published in November 1926, Washington, D.C. He finished his college education at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania in 1929. Besides poetry, he also wrote novels, short stories and plays. He held that Paul Laurence Dunbar was one of his primary influences. The characteristic of his work was "he wanted to tell the stories of his people in ways that reflected their actual culture, including their love of music, laughter, and language itself alongside their suffering". Langston Hughes died of complications from prostate cancer 1967, in New York City.

Thus, it can be seen that Paul Dunbar and Langston Hughes lived in segregation time and experienced racism themselves. It seems to explain why Paul Laurence Dunbar's "We Wear the Mask" and Langston Hughes "I, Too" shared something in common that they linger around on racism undergone by African Americans, their sufferings and identity problem of the people.

African Americans Identity Problem in Langston Hughes' "I, Too"

"I, Too" is a disapproving response to American racism in the early of twentieth century. However, the speaker of the poem states that perseverance will finally free him from exclusion from the American life and he finally will gain recognition.

I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother.

They send me to eat in the kitchen

When company comes,

But I laugh,

And eat well,

And grow strong.

Tomorrow,

I'll be at the table

When company comes.

Nobody'll dare

Say to me,

"Eat in the kitchen,"

Then.

Besides,

They'll see how beautiful I am

And be ashamed—

I, too, am America.

The first stanza of the poem shows the discrimination due to race and the response to it. The first line of the poem *I, too, sing America* indicates that the speaker is an American citizen, thus, part of America. The phrase *sing America* seems to resort to American anthem or national songs. The singing of the song is naturally only done by American citizens, including the speaker. The speaker of the poem himself is presumably an African American as there is a line *I am the darker brother*. The word "darker" here refers to the African American's skin color, that is darker as compared to other races in America. The word "brother" actually shows the relation between the speaker, as an African American, and other races. It indicates equal relation, without necessarily being more superior or inferior than other races in America as they are all American citizens living in the same America. Here, the speaker claims his equal position as a citizen of the country, America. (The country, America, is their mother, citizens are her sons. Thus, the races living in the country are brothers in the motherland; they are family)

However, the darkness of the African Americans is not only on their skin, but also on their fate. For centuries, they had been put in bondage; formerly as indentured servants to slaves, till

finally to discriminated citizens deprived of their human and citizenship rights. Lots of sufferings happened to them physically, emotionally and psychologically.

Basically, the lines “They send me to the kitchen/ when company comes” indicate the discrimination happened to the Black American in the era, the segregation time. The speaker is not allowed to sit at the same table with the white as his company comes. He does not want him to be with them at the same room, eat together with him and his company, and have conversation with them. Instead, he is sent to the kitchen, a small place which is usually situated at the back of the house. Here, the white man has denied the black man’s right of being equal as human beings as when the white has a white company visiting his house, he sends him to the kitchen. This line, in fact, gives example of how the whites in general treat their black counterparts or brothers and deny the black’s right of equality. The word kitchen itself seems to signify domesticity or limitation in African Americans’ life as it shows how the African Americans only have little opportunity in their lives, i.e., job mobility and equal treatment in every sector of life. They only can have second or third opportunity in life, after the whites. They cannot be at the front, like the location of the kitchen in a house itself. Besides, the act of sending the black to the kitchen here alludes the segregation era, in which the whites and the blacks cannot be at the same room using the same facilities, especially in public places.

The lines “But I laugh,/ And eat well/And grow strong” show how the speaker responds to the discriminatory treatment done by the white man to him. The response shows that he does not lament his ordeal or sink into sadness or self-pity. Instead, he is able to laugh over the white’s act, showing that he is a strong man as he does not take this degrading treatment deeply into his heart. His decision to laugh seems to show that he tries to be happy despite the racial discrimination as if their treatment to him is foolish. He even decides to eat well because eating well will make him stronger. His decision of growing strong shows his realization that he has to be tough to survive and eventually is able to fight for his right.

The next stanza depicts the speaker’s optimism, hope and dream of equality with the white mainstream in the future.

The lines “tomorrow, / I’ll be at the table/ when company comes” indicates the speaker’s claim of equality in the future. There will not be discriminatory treatment to him; he will not be segregated any more. The lines “nobody’ll dare/ say to me “eat in the kitchen,”/ then” seem to emphasize his wish that no one dares to tell him what to do and order him to do what he does not want to. This in fact points to the equality he dreams to achieve.

The next stanza shows the speaker’s claim of self-pride and self-worth. Through the lines “besides/ they’ll see how beautiful I am/ and be ashamed” the speaker wants to say that he is a man with good quality, which may refer to physical and potential qualities though the whites might not want to acknowledge them. He seems want to counter all the negative stereotypes imposed to

the African Americans. So far, the African Americans have been labeled with negative stereotypes, as rapists, ignorant men, or men with good physical quality only, due to racial prejudice. They are labeled to be inferior. However, the speaker wants to say that the whites have been wrong in thinking about him. Proudly, he exclaims that he is a “beautiful” man. His blackness does not mean bad quality; his blackness is beauty. This seems also to say that he is also a man with good potential. Finally, the whites will be ashamed of the unjust treatment to the African Americans and having racial prejudice against them when in the reality the African Americans have helped building the existence and civilization of America through the long history of oppressing and exploiting the race through the practice of slavery and denying of their rights as both Americans and human beings.

The poem has presented the identity problem of African Americans, represented by the speaker. The identity problem is seen through the paradox in the life of African Americans. Civil Rights Acts has proclaimed that all persons born in the United States are American citizens with the same rights and that the Declaration of Independence declares that all men are created equal and are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; however, the African Americans were treated discriminatorily due to their race to the bottom of human condition. Not only that they are discriminated and segregated from the American life, but also that they had been enslaved for centuries. The American society, even the government, has denied their rights to be fully Americans although the African Americans themselves have identified them as Americans, as the speaker says that he also sings America. Thus, such condition shows the identity problem of the African Americans because it is not clear who African Americans truly are.

Identity Problem of African Americans in Paul Laurence Dunbar’s “We Wear the Mask”

"We Wear the Mask" is a response to the experience of being black in America in the late 19th century, after the Civil War. The African Americans *seemed* to get life improvement, but in reality, the period was still marked by intense racism and hardship. In the poem, Paul Dunbar shows that surviving the pain of oppression is like wearing a mask that hides the suffering of its wearer while presenting a happy face to the world.

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!

The first stanza talks about pretence that an oppressed group has to do. Amidst their sufferings they have to pretend to be happy. They have to constantly hide their true self and feelings. The word 'we' in this case presumably refer to the African Americans although there is no mention that 'we' points to a certain group. Its poet may even be regarded to belong to this group. Meanwhile, the mask here metaphorically signifies the pretence because mask always covers the face of the wearer, hiding the real face as well as its expressions and emotions. And indeed, the poet mentions that "we wear the mask that grins and lies/it hides our cheeks and shades our eyes". The mask is mentioned as grinning. Grinning looks like smiling, that shows happiness, but actually it is not a genuine smile. When someone grins, he does not really smile, so he lies about his true feelings. The mask also hides someone face (cheeks) so that it does not show who the wearer really is. When it shades the wearer's eyes; it actually hides his true self since the eyes are organs that show the true self of the owner. In short, the mask has covered the wearer's true identity, feelings and emotions.

The next lines this debt "we pay to human guile/with torn and bleeding heart we smile/and mouth with myriad subtleties" depict how the African Americans have to hide their true feelings and agony because of the oppression by the white to survive in their long sufferings despite their

anguish. Enduring all the agonies, they turn to be skilful in pretending as a way to survive the torment.

In the second stanza the speaker makes reference to the society or 'the world' he lives in. The lines "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" the speaker questions why the mainstream society should know about their suffering when they are not sympathetic to their agony. He suggests that it is better they see them wearing mask only because not only that the society might not be commiserating, but also that he does not want the oppressor to enjoy the power imposed on them and see them suffered. Thus, wearing the mask or keeping pretending is better for them as it is safer for them.

In the lines "We smile, but O great Christ, our cries/to thee from tortures souls arise" the speaker asks the God for their freedom from oppression and suffering seeing the fact that they still have long ordeal. They want to be free from the very deep anguish. The lines "We sing, but oh the clay is vile/beneath our feet, and the long mile/But let the world dream otherwise/We wear the mask" indicate that their journey in facing the ordeal is still a long way to go; however, they will face it bravely. They also seem to take confidence in their skill of pretending, hiding their true self and feelings.

The poem has also unveiled African American identity. The way of wearing mask for survival has indicated the existence of racism against the race. The injustice of racism has brought oppressive and sad condition to the African Americans, and these can be traced through the expressions: *tom and bleeding hearts, our tears and sighs, tortured souls*. The practice of racism to the African Americans is of course paradoxical to the claim that America is a country that promises equality and unalienable rights to its citizens. It is indeed ironical that as citizens of their own country, African Americans are racially discriminated so that they have to "wear mask" without being able to show their true selves, their true feelings and emotions. Thus, it creates a question on who the African Americans actually are.

The Poets' Attitudes to Racism and World View

Through the poems, the poets express their disapproving response to racism they themselves in fact experienced in different decades. They show similar disapproval to the racism experienced by African Americans. However, the tone of the two poems seems to be different. The poem "I, Too" is more optimistic in responding to the America's denial of African American identity. It can be seen in the expression that *the whites will not send the speaker to eat in the kitchen*, which means there is no more racial discrimination and there is equality. And even the speaker is optimistically proud to himself, claiming that everyone will see the beauty (potential) in him. This denotes

empowerment of the African Americans so that finally they will be equal to the whites and the whites will be ashamed of their behaviour to them as they have wrongly treated the citizens of America. In this poem also the tone of anger and protesting, besides the pride, can be felt.

Meanwhile “We Wear the Mask” that was written in the period prior to “I Too”, does not show as strong optimism as “I, Too”. There is lamenting, melancholic tone in the poem. The poem also denotes some kind of pride differently. When “I, Too” shows pride of being black and having potential so that finally the African Americans will gain equality, “We Wear the Mask” shows the pride of wearing mask or having the skill of hiding their true selves and feelings as a means of survival in facing racism. Thus, enduring the plights under the mask makes the African Americans survive the discrimination. Nonetheless, a kind of optimism or enthusiasm can also slightly be seen in “We Wear the Mask” through the repetition of the sentence “We Wear the Mask” and exclamation mark at the last line of the poem. Thus, the poets have shown different attitude in the poems. However, though differently expressed, both poets have expressed their view of disapproving to racism and dream of equality where African Americans gain the full rights as citizens of the country.

CONCLUSION

Both poems, Langston Hughes’ “I, Too” and Paul Dunbar’s “We Wear the Mask” are responses to the racism in the 20th century and 19th century respectively. Both poems have recorded the plight of being Blacks in the white country where they are deprived of the full rights as citizen through discrimination and segregation. The paradoxical condition faced by the African Americans as they live in a country that promotes equality but discriminates this minority makes the identity of African Americans confusing. There is a question of who they are. Meanwhile, the poets have expressed their attitude to the racism and dream of equality in the future. As apparent in the poem, the poets are optimistic that in the future, African Americans will gain equality with other races. To sum up, these two poems have revealed portrayal of the plights of a race, African American, being discriminated by their own country and the difficult, hard, long journey to gain full acceptance into the country’s life.

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