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Fitting in

Have we conformed to society? It’s so easy to get wrapped up into acting how everyone else acts, or thinking the way everyone else does. Conformity means a social influence, involving the alteration of oneself in order to meet the standards of a group. We want to feel normal in the world, so we conform to society's view of how we should behave. People conform into acting how others act in their social class. Whether one is old, young, poor, or rich, people act as everyone else does at their social status. When something happens, we realize how influenced we are into acting normal and not acting like ourselves. We conform into behaving a certain way, but we believe we are not actually conforming. We want to believe we have a unique personality, but in reality our personality mirrors the ones around us. Paul Laurence Dunbar’s poem, “We Wear the Mask” and John Updike’s story, “A&P”, prove how society wears masks and have conformed into being like everyone else.

An article from Simply Psychology states, “The term conformity is often used to indicate an agreement to the majority position, brought about either by a desire to ‘*fit in*’ or be liked (normative) or because of a desire to be correct (informational), or simply to conform to a social role (identification)” (McLeod). The poem, “We Wear the Mask” states, “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” (Dunbar). Only while alone, can we cry or feel sad. While out in the world around people, we have to hide negative emotions, and act like someone else. As seen acceptable in society, we should look and act like we have our life together. Surrounded with masks proves that everyone around lives a lie while in the presence of other people. Tina Williamson’s article on The Huffington Post, “5 Masks We Wear and Why We Should Take Them Off”,stated that, “We are all performing, all of the time. We pretend we have it all together, that everything is perfect” (Williamson). Someone may act completely content and happy while around others, but they have a completely opposite life when not wearing their mask. We tend to hide our emotions from people because of the stereotypes from society of what we should be in order to be attractive. The same article mentioned that, “Masks are harming you, by creating resistance to life’s natural movement” (Williamson). Putting up a facade everyday changes the way one thinks as a person.

The more someone puts on a fake face and not let out their natural emotions, the more being fake hurts them as a person. In society, one acts how he or she believes they should act in order to follow the idea of Social Darwinism, along with how they wish to be perceived. Initially advocated in the 19th and 20th century by Herbert Spencer, Social Darwinism, the idea that the strong will outlive the weak, followed Charles Darwin’s concept of Natural Selection. “According to the theory, which was popular in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the weak were diminished and their [cultures](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cultures) delimited while the strong grew in power and in cultural influence over the weak” (Encyclopedia Britannica). In short, “those with strength (economic, physical, technological) flourish and those without are destined for extinction” (AllAboutScience). People at a higher social class conform to the normal ways of society, while the lower class have completely different standards. In the higher social status, people act more mature than someone in a lower class, socially. Lower class people, for the most part, act like themselves and do not really care what others think, while members of the upper class hold to a more professional standard. For example lower class people dress sloppy with things like saggy pants, while upper class dress much nicer because of how much they care about how others see them. The individuality one has, depends on where they fall on the Social Pyramid. Now society deals with an individuality deficit.

In the story, “A&P”, Sammy works in a normal grocery store where people go about their lives. From his eyes, everyone does the same thing and acts the same way everyday they come into the grocery store to buy something. He describes the customers, “The sheep pushing their carts down the aisle – the girls were walking against the usual traffic (not that we have one-way signs or anything) – were pretty hilarious" (Updike, 5). Describing customers as sheep shows how people conform to the normal way people should act. They have come to lack individuality. The sheep in the store reflect society’s influences. Updike uses a normal, familiar setting to tell his story; he shows that an everyday place does not have everyday stories. This analysis of the story states, “Updike is known for this kind of thing – taking ordinary aspects of American life and showing us how they are actually extraordinary” (Shmoop). The grocery store seems more like a place for adults; the store has neat aisles, and filled with people who have fallen into the mainstream of today. When the teenage girls come into this world of conformity, the adults look way too serious and materialistic. Just using a simple place, such as a grocery store, Updike shows how people all around us attempt to act normal in everyday life. All around us, in everyday situations, most people act like someone completely different than how they truly act at times alone. Individuality seems nonexistent because of the amount of influence the world puts on how we act.

Everywhere we go, we see people who hide themselves because of the way they want others to see them. The chronic need for conformity makes meeting pure people extremely hard. This makes one ask if they really have true, genuine, friends. If someone wears a mask, they lie to themselves everyday. These people lack the self confidence to act like themselves. The concept of deception not only seems socially acceptable, but is what people expect in social situations. Opening up and taking off the metaphorical mask in a fresh relationship or friendship, can be nerve racking because, “No matter how old you are, a girl or boy, there are moments that you might question your self-worth or value because of how others have made you feel” (The Mask). Going out in public without your, now critical facade, makes you feel insecure, insignificant, and out of place. Society is on the route to becoming like robots who can not do anything but deceive and lie to themselves and those around them. How long can we hide behind these masks before we become the masks themselves?

Conforming into acting “normal” or pretending to be someone else has become an overwhelming problem in society. If society as a whole continues to yield to group pressures at the current rate, the idea of individuality will be pushed into extinction. Unfortunately, this issue can only get worse before this issue gets resolved. The short story, “A&P”, and the poem, “We Wear the Mask”, do a great job proving these problems in society. We feel the need to hide our emotions because as a society, we have yet to fully accept negative feelings. Hiding your emotions seems easier than trusting someone enough to be yourself around. Analyzing these two pieces of literature has made me realize how fake everyone acts in society, and how hard meeting genuine people in everyday life can be.

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