

# THE SYMBOLISM OF MASKS

By Sarah Gudgeon



## I. Read

Happy masks; sad masks; scary masks; funny masks. There are all kinds of masks, but why do people wear them?

In the past, some people wore masks to frighten their *enemies*. Putting on their headgear, war paint and masks transformed the men and women into warriors. In some places, people still dress up and put on masks on special occasions. It is their way of honouring the dead and the traditions of their ancestors.

In Ancient Egypt, family and friends used to put masks on the dead. They believed this would help the spirit to return to the right body, to rest in peace for eternity. People were also buried with precious artefacts as well as everyday items to allow them to live well in the afterlife.

In modern day society, we often associate masks with superheroes or the theatre. Popular comic book heroes like Spiderman and Batman wear costumes and masks to hide their true identity. They are ordinary guys most of the time but their costumes and masks help to make them invincible. They work by day and save lives by night. Without the anonymity provided by the masks, they would not be able to do their good deeds without coming under *threat* from the *baddies*.

Back to the real world. Almost. At the theatre, every actor assumes a new identity; they must become the character they *portray* on stage. As well as their vocal skills, facial expressions, gestures and movements, actors also use costumes and masks to help them do this. Plays can be funny or tragic and the symbol you see in every theatre represents these emotions: one happy mask, one sad mask.

Masks give people the power to identify themselves or to transform themselves into someone or something else.

### **Glossary**

**enemies:** nemici

**threat:** minaccia

**baddies:** i cattivi

**portray:** raffigurare

## **2. Answer the questions**

- a. Why did people often wear masks in the past?
- b. How do some people respect their traditions nowadays?
- c. Why did they put masks on the dead in Ancient Egypt?
- d. Why do superheroes want to hide their real identity?
- e. How do masks help actors on stage?
- f. What are the two main reasons for wearing a mask?

## **3. Think of a superhero. Imagine you work for the New York Police Department. You want to catch this guy before he destroys any more of the city with his extravagant rescue operations.**

Write an email to you colleagues telling them to contact you immediately if they see him.

Remember to include information about his costume/mask, where he was last seen, and the damage he has caused.

## Teacher's Notes

2.

- a. To transform themselves into warriors and frighten their enemies.
- b. By dressing up and putting on masks on special occasions.
- c. To help guide the spirit back to the body, to its eternal resting place.
- d. So that they can do their good deeds without being targeted/threatened by the baddies.
- e. They help them to become the character they have to portray.
- f. To identify yourself or transform yourself.

3. Extension activity: Hold a press conference.

1/3 of the class can be from NY police department, 1/3 journalists and 1/3 important businessmen/women. Each group has to prepare statements/ questions before the role-play. Great for practising the present perfect.