

Masque Short Guide

Masque by F. Paul Wilson

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Overview

Masque, published in 1998, recounts the adventures of Tristan, a mime. Tristan is not a mime of the street clown variety, but an artificially created clone who can be programmed through his metamorphic DNA into a "masque"; a perfect genetic copy of anyone or anything.

A spy for Kaze Glom, Tristan longs for selfhood, a permanent form, which will give him freedom. On what is to be his last mission, however, he learns that selfhood involves more than he bargained for and he is faced with questions about loyalty, integrity, honor, and love that threaten all the dreams he had for his future. Slowly, he comes to understand what freedom and selfhood really mean and sets out on a mission of his own choosing.

About the Author

F. Paul Wilson was born May 17 ,1946, in Jersey City, New Jersey, the son of Francis Paul and Mary Sullivan Wilson. He graduated from Georgetown University in 1968 and pursued a career in medicine and writing. A prolific author, he has more than fifty books to his credit, mostly in the areas science fiction, horror, and suspense.

As a youth, Wilson says he spent his time reading comics, listening to music and watching TV comedy and horror movies.

He says he once managed to watch King Kong eleven times in one week. Later, his interest in science fiction and horror developed into a writing career of enviable proportion when measured by volume.

Wilson divides his time equally between his two careers. He says that medicine enlarges his human contact and contributes to keeping his writing fresh; the two work symbiotically for him.

Wilson married an educator, Mary Murphy, in 1969. They have two children, Jennifer and Meggan, and currently live in Brick, New Jersey. When not writing or pursuing medicine, Wilson enjoys tennis, book collecting, travel, playing drums, guitar and piano.

Masque co-author Matthew J. Costello, born in 1948, lives in New York State and pursues a career as a computer-game scenarist and writer. He is the author or coauthor of over seventeen novels including *The Seventh Guest* (1995), *Maelstrom* (2000), *Mirage*, with F. Paul Wilson, (1996), and *Wurm* (1991). He also has a number of nonfiction works to his credit including *How To Write Science Fiction* (1995). His articles have appeared in publications ranging from the *Los Angeles Times* to *Sports Illustrated*. Costello wrote the scripts for the best-selling CD-ROM interactive dramas, *The Seventh Guest* and its sequel, *The Eleventh Hour*.



Setting

Somewhere, in earth's imagined future, two corporate city-states are pitted against each other in a struggle for power. Though the allusion is somewhat indirect, we are given to understand that this "somewhere" was once North America, possibly the United States. Now, with technology advanced almost beyond comprehension, the world as it existed in the twenty-first century is all but destroyed. Little record of it remains except on the bubble screen of old vids which Tristan, the mime, watches with interest and not a little longing for what he conceives as a paradise lost.

The cities, Kaze Glom and Flagg Glom, are cold places, barren and impersonal.

While clear description is lacking, the image of pale glass and steel high rises and canyon like streets devoid of energy or enthusiasm, comes to the reader's mind.

Fringing the cities is a no-man's-land, mouldering and dangerous, aptly named the jumble. Here, the streets are dark, the buildings falling into ruin, while inside them lurk the desperate outcasts of a society more brutal even than they. Only the foolhardy or the fugitive would venture into this wasteland.

Between the jumbles lies the freezone, an architectural plain of mostly three-story buildings housing enclaves of disparate groups held together only by the fact that they are not part of the gloms. Once the freezone was an area of suburban sprawl, high-tech farmland, industrial parks, and wild spaces filled with trees and wildlife.

Now it serves as a dumping ground for rejects—rejected people, rejected technology. It is here that a thriving black market of services and deals lures desperate people from all walks of life. Within the freezone, are entertainments of every sort, mime fights, flesh districts, bazaars, and markets where antiques, such as Mr. Coffee makers, cocktail shakers, and other collectibles from bygone days are sold.

Travel from glom to glom over the jumbles and freezone is by tube nexi, through which clear capsules silently hurtle at tremendous speed. Here, passengers, if they care enough to look down, have a view of the cityscape from a thousand-meter height.

Other means of travel include floaters, cruisers, speeders, and flyers; all designed to transport passengers from place to place at breakneck speed. There are also vertical tunnels with handholds that, through some mysterious vacuum technology, propel travelers from floor to floor of buildings in the gloms.

Somewhere—above, below, around, or within, we are never given its exact location—the Ocean provides pleasurable escapes from stress for those who can dive into it and swim. Because "if you don't learn how to swim, you drown."

The setting for action in *Masque* is integral to the story and serves to create an atmosphere of terror and violence that sweeps through streets and alleyways respecting



no one. Psychological and physical manipulation abounds. Unimaginable horrors await the inexperienced around every corner and behind every door. It is a world of hate, treachery, deceit, and degradation.

Wilson and Costello bring this place to life through graphic description of action and character. In one scene, Tristan, in his masque as a spy, witnesses a mime street fight to the death complete with thuds, groans, roars, blood and wrenching body parts. In scenes where a mime is "fluxing" we hear his moans and feel his agony as he changes from one masque to another.

Language serves to determine the setting, and the authors' invented vocabulary is intriguing, though it sometimes leaves a lot to the imagination. Gloms govern the world, sibs hate the mimes, vids bring old movies into the bubble screens, and avatars who can be switched on and off supply the newsfeeds. Mimes are prone to psychseep from their masques and eye blinks activate their neuronets. Datamiesters, shufflers, real people, gladiators, imagists, and brutally savage Dwellers inhabit this virtual world along with the gloms and mimes and humans. Moppets tidy up the rooms. Genotypes, discoid cases, interactive knick knacks, plasmids, mime warrens, and inoculum patches are all a part of the language that places Masque in another world from our own, but, eerily enough, not too far.

The characters created by Wilson and Costello are heavily influenced by their environment. The isolation, fear, and impersonal quality of their lives is compounded by the mostly offstage villains who rule the gloms.

Future time is made clear in Wilson and Costello's allusions to the old movies that so entrance Tristan. Reference to flatties and black and whites, such as Casablanca and It's a Wonderful Life, and a fleeting emergence of a Marilyn Monroe impersonator in the freezone let us know we have passed the world of the present. Tristan's personal avatar is, in the opening pages, an English butler. But as he attempts to reprogram his personal PDA in the freezone, a succession of previous avatars make their appearance and he recycles through a conglomeration of characters from the vids.

Tonto, Gabby Hayes, Dr. Spock, Art Carney, Cardinal Richelieu, Ann Southern, and Bugs Bunny show up one after another to complicate his life.



Social Sensitivity

Masque is a story both sexist and chauvinistic. The plot revolves around the male mime protagonist and the mimes who become his brothers. If there are female mimes who want to stay female, we never see them. Other than Okasan and Lani Rouge, the only female characters are the occasional shuffler or streetwalker, and Selina, a member of an actors' troupe with the appearance of a hammerhead shark.

Lani, except for the retrieval of Tristan's template and her help with subduing Eel, exhibits an inability to take much action.

She waits for Tristan to return, hoping he will appear to her in the guise of Trev, her lost love as he did when they first met. She helplessly collects "things" which fill her apartment and which she will never use.

She feels she cannot even make a "mess" because the Moppets immediately clean it up. She believes that her years as a datamiester will be rewarded with pleasure and a fine independent income when, actually, her job is slowly and insidiously causing her to lose her ability to think clearly or creatively.

Further, Lani must be rescued from the Flagg Glom, Steiger, and in the end is left alone as Tristan joins his "brothers" in the fight for freedom of the mimes. She is not invited to join Tristan and she makes no move of her own to become a part of the resistance to the corporations. Rather, she is left behind to fend for herself with no support and no resources, while Tristan goes with the Proteans on a mission to discover his real selfhood. Lani becomes the typical fairy-tale female waiting for her prince to make her life complete.

Okasan exhibits some strength in that she has defied the corporations and works to make amends for the monster she unleashed with discovery of the Goleman chromosome. But in the end, she assumes the role of "mother" to the mimes and sacrifices herself for her "children."

Thus, both characters take on the stereotypical roles often expected of women.

On the other hand, the problem of genetic creation raises many questions about the ethics of a society in control and brings the story directly into the present debate of genetic alteration and test-tube human beings. This is the implicit theme that runs through the plot of Masque. What are the real consequences of genetic creation? Could there really be the chance of discovering a Goleman chromosome? And how would society deal with it? If clones, who can be programmed to change their shape as can the mimes, were actually produced, who would be responsible for them? What would be their role in society? This is not only a social issue of major proportions, but a political one as well. Wilson and Costello indicate that we may be closer to these issues than we think.



Literary Qualities

On the surface, *Masque* appears to be a straightforward formulaic tale of terror.

Some episodes resemble scenes from the latest Hollywood car chase or a particularly vicious evening with the X-Files. But with thoughtful reading, a number of more subtle elements of story surface.

Wilson and Costello call upon various literary archetypes to give substance and color to their work. Tristan is a shape shifter, a master of transformation who sets out on both a literal journey and a search for self.

The circular literary device of the hero who leaves home only to return, takes a different twist when Tristan finds he has been betrayed and leaves Kaze Glom to join his brothers in the freezone. It is here that he finds his "family" and the understanding of what selfhood means begins to dawn.

The title, *Masque*, becomes a metaphor for the life Tristan sees around him. What masques do others wear? Who can be trusted to be what they really are? How can he learn what is behind the masque? What is behind his own? Tristan longs for a lost paradise of wilderness adventure and human relationships where people and events are straightforward and clear as his inner journey takes him from innocence to maturity through a fearful desert of horror, terror, and fear.

On this journey to prove himself, Tristan meets helpers as in the mythic tales; a beautiful young woman, an old woman of power, a former mime, the mimes of the Protean brotherhood, a troupe of actors, and a renegade mime whose motives are questionable until the final battle with Flagg Glom.

Tristan learns from each these characters and with their help, begins a new journey toward selfhood.

Wilson and Costello show considerable expertise with the use of language and imagery in *Masque*. The plot is fast paced and linear, but the dialogue is occasionally tedious and the sentence structure choppy. There are occasional references to nudity and sexual perversions in *Masque*, but the one love scene is handled with sensitivity. A short chapter at the beginning, apparently, meant to set the scene, leaves the reader at a loss since it is never referred to again. We can only speculate at its meaning.



Themes and Characters

The primary themes in *Masque*, center on the conflict between good and evil and in the beginning, it is clear that evil has the upper hand. The gloms dominate society, mimes are at the mercy of their handlers and humans are pitted against the mimes whom they see as taking away their economic security.

Tristan, who longs for selfhood, explicitly states that selfhood, a permanent form, is what every mime strives for. Therefore, selfhood, as defined in these terms, is good.

As his story progresses, he comes to realize that selfhood is more than just a permanent shape. Integrity, dignity, purpose, brotherhood, love and truth must be part and parcel of selfhood or humanity. He had thought to have selfhood as a reward for his completion of dangerous missions and loyalty to Kaze Glom, but found that selfhood cannot come as a gift, but must be won.

Family units are good things and even mimes, the lowest of slaves, deserve a family. Victory over the mime handlers and eventual selfhood belongs to the clever and the strong. There is strength in numbers.

These themes carry the story and help to define the character of Tristan.

Tristan, the mime, is a clone, an artificial being, faceless, sexless, created in a test tube. He is the central character in *Masque*.

In his journey from innocence to maturity, he becomes, while not quite a fully developed character, at least a stronger, more discerning, less fearful one. Longing for what he believes is the lost paradise of earth, he finally casts aside a dream for the reality of truth, personal discovery, and brotherhood which may, in time, reestablish paradise.

Around Tristan are placed the stock characters of a television melodrama. Lani, the beautiful woman; Mung, the one-time mime now messenger, go-between and human; Okasan, the old woman of mystery; Kreck, Callin, and Eel, fellow Protean mimes whose courage and vision change Tristan's life; cardboard villains, Cyrill and Steiger; and a succession of peculiar avatars, who change momentarily, all serve as foils to further the hero's action.



Topics for Discussion

1. What are the literary merits of Masque? Why do you think so?
2. In small groups, create a story map of Masque complete with time line and illustrations. Compare maps and discuss similarities and differences.
3. Identify the major and minor themes in Masque. Critique and discuss.
4. What are the ethical considerations in Masque? What position would a mime have in society today? What attitudes might society have toward him?
5. What comparisons can be made between society in the twenty-first century and that of the society in Masque?

What differences?

6. What stereotypes exist in Masque? Why do you think the author created those stereotypes?
7. What possible relationship does Wilson and Costello's literary style have to current popular films or videos? Why or why not?
8. In small groups, discuss journal entries on personal reactions to Masque. How do reactions compare? What are similarities and differences? Where do members agree or disagree?
9. Small groups may make an open-mind portrait of a character of their choice.

Share and discuss these portraits with the class.

10. Form a panel discussion. What implicit statement does Masque make about the ramifications of genetic alterations?

Where do we, as a society, stand on this issue? What are its advantages? Its dangers?

11. How do Wilson and Costello's references to old videos serve to develop the character of Tristan? How do they help to establish the setting?
12. How are the female characters treated in Masque? What was the authors' purpose? How would the story have changed if Lani and Okasan been less static?
13. What role did Mung play in the story?

Why was he there? Was it he who appeared in the prologue? What purpose did the prologue serve?

14. How does the prejudice toward mimes and their roles as slaves to the gloms compare with contemporary attitudes toward minorities today? Are we better off or not?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Have students respond to these questions in their reading journals. What feelings, memories, or emotions did the story evoke for you? What literary connections could you make with other stories you have read? What was the major impact this story had on you?

What is the value of this story?

2. Have the students respond to the following questions about story structure in their journals. What is the conflict in *Masque*? How does the primary character, Tristan, evolve? How does setting affect the action? What makes the story science fiction?

3. Write a paper comparing *Masque* with a novel such as *Brothers in Arms* (1989) by Lois McMaster Bujold or *1984* by George Orwell.

4. Write a portion of the story from Lani's point of view: her experience with Okasan, her conflict about Trev, or her rescue from Flagg Glom, for example.

Experiment with creating Lani as a more developed character.

5. Write an opinion article for or against cloning of human beings. What are the personal and ethical considerations?

6. Write a character sketch of Mung describing his background as a mime, his present relationship to Okasan, and how he came to be human. Make him a more fully developed character.

7. Do an Internet search of authors, Wilson and Costello; their lives and work.

8. Rewrite *Masque* as a one-hour screenplay. 9. Examine the history of science fiction in the twentieth century. How have science-fiction authors correctly predicted the future? Where have they not done so?

10. Have students interview friends, teachers, family members about the pros and cons of genetic alteration and cloning.

11. Research the history of genetic alteration, test-tube conception, and cloning in the twentieth century. What have been the ethical considerations?

12. Write a speculative piece about the future of cloning, genetic alteration, and test-tube conception in the century to come. What will this mean to future human beings?

13. Write a short fictional piece about life in the jumble from the viewpoint of an inhabitant there.



For Further Reference

Aldiss, Brian. *Billion Year Spree: The True History Science Fiction*. New York: Shocken Books, 1973. A helpful guide to science fiction over time.

Asimov, Isaac. "The Ugly Little Boy." In *Tomorrow's Children*, edited by Isaac Asimov. New York: Doubleday, 1966.

A child, brought, by time machine, from the Neanderthal Age, experiences prejudice.

Bradbury, Ray. "All Summer in a Day." In *Tomorrow's Children*, edited by Isaac Asimov. New York: Doubleday, 1966. A child who knows too much is ostracized by her peers and misses summer.

Butler, Octavia. *Dawn*. New York: Warner Books, 1987. Genetic experimentation and prejudice abound in this novel.

Davenport, Basil. *The Science Fiction Novel: Imagination and Social Criticism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959. A helpful book for literary critics.

Hughes, M. "Science Fiction as Myth and Metaphor." *ALAN Review*. (1992): 2-5. An author discusses her work in terms of its logic, character, mythic, and metaphorical content.

Huxley, Aldous. *Brave New World*. New York: Harper & Row, 1932. A classic novel of societal control gone mad. Lowry, Lois. *The Giver*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1993. A story of a utopian society gone wrong.

McNurlin, K. "A Question of Ethics in the Science Fiction Genre." *Interdisciplinary Humanities*. (1995): 19-36. Discusses how science fiction treats the problems of ethics in story form.

Orwell, George. *1984*. New York: Brace, Jovanovich, 1949. Predicts how society will be controlled in the year 1984. There are some startling similarities to today's world.

Profile of Francis Paul Wilson. In *Contemporary Authors*, Volume 138. Detroit: Gale, 1993, pp. 457-60. A review of Wilson's work and a short comment on his life.

Profile of Matthew J. Costello. In *St. James Guide to Horror, Ghost, and Gothic Writers*, edited by David Pringle. Detroit: St. James Press, 1998. A review of some of Costello's early books and a short comment on his life.

White, B. "The Hero in Science Fiction." *The Voice of Youth Advocates*. (1999): 42-50. Discusses the role of the hero character in several science fiction novels.

Wilhelm, Kate. *Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang*. New York: Harper & Row, 1976. A frighteningly possible tale of human cloning.

Related Titles/Adaptations

Students may want to consider other titles by Wilson such as *Dydeetown World*, a futuristic science-fiction novel replete with slavish clones, murderers, prostitutes, and legions of illegitimate children. This book was named an American Library Association Best Book for Young Adults in 1990.

Mirage, by Wilson and Costello, may be of interest as well. More of a med thriller, this is the story of a neuropsychologist who taps into her twin's memory to reveal secrets of their past involvements in brain experiments.

Of more substance are works by Isaac Asimov ("The Ugly Little Boy," 1966), Ray Bradbury ("All Summer in a Day," 1966), and Octavia Butler (*Dawn*, 1987) which deal with prejudice and ostracism. The question of societal control can be found in Lois Lowry's *The Giver* (1993), Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), and George Orwell's *1984* (1949)—all classics in the science-fiction field. Kate Wilhelm's *Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang* (1976) describes a world where the population has been cloned nearly to the point of extinction. *Dawn* and *Brave New World* both speak to the issue of genetic design and alteration.

For students who wish to examine the history of science fiction, Brian Aldiss's *Billion Year Spree: The True History of Science Fiction* (1973) might be useful. Also, for those interested in criticism of the genre, *The Science Fiction Novel: Imagination and Social Criticism* (1959) by Basil Davenport, is available for study.

Related Web Sites

Profile of F. Paul Wilson. Lexis Nexis Academic Universe. <http://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe>. Biographical information and a lengthy list of major works.



Copyright Information

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