

# Countee Cullen

## (1903-1946)



The publication in 1925 of Countee Cullen's first volume of poems, *Color*, made him, according to the critic Gerald Early, "the most celebrated and probably the most famous black writer in America," both the harbinger and the embodiment of the Renaissance proclaimed by Alain Locke in *The New Negro*. "He was, indeed," writes Early, "a boy wonder, a young handsome black Ariel ascending, a boyish, bronze-skinned titan who, in the early and mid-twenties, embodied many of the hopes, aspirations, and maturing expressive possibilities of his people."

The details of Cullen's early years are a bit unclear. Born either in Louisville, Kentucky, or, as he later claimed, New York City, he was adopted as a youth by the Reverend Dr. Frederick A. Cullen, a minister in the Salem Methodist Episcopal Church in Harlem and a social activist, with whom he remained close throughout his life. He attended mostly white schools in New York City, where he met his lifelong friend Harold Jackman, and was the editor of his high school paper. The top award in a citywide poetry contest brought him precocious attention. He attended New York University, where he was elected to Phi Beta Kappa, and, while he was still in school, his poem "The Shroud of Color" was published in H. L. Mencken's *American Mercury*. In his senior year, he published his career-making *Color*, a collection of lyric poems and sonnets that show their indebtedness to both the forms and subjects of Keats, Shelley, Wordsworth, and the Romantics. He did graduate work at Harvard, receiving his M.A. in 1926, and then joined the journal *Opportunity*, where he wrote the column "The Dark Tower." In 1927 Cullen published a second volume of poems, *Copper Sun*, and edited the anthology *Caroling Dusk*, and the following year he was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship. Then, in April 1928, in one of the most celebrated social events of the Harlem Renaissance, he married the daughter of W. E. B. Du Bois, Nina Yolande, in a union that seemed to form a bridge between a literary giant of the previous generation with a scion of the new. The marriage lasted less than a year. Cullen spent two years in Paris, and upon his return took a job teaching French at Frederick Douglass, Jr., High School in New York,

where he remained for the fifteen years until his death. His last major work, *The Black Christ, and Other Poems*, was published in 1929.

Despite Cullen's assertion in a 1924 interview, "If I am going to be a poet at all, I am going to be *poet* and not *Negro poet*," perhaps no poet since Paul Laurence Dunbar struggled so publicly with the double-consciousness of belonging to both a black tradition and the dominant Anglo-American one. While employing the forms and often academic language of English verse, such poems as "The Shroud of Color," "Heritage," "A Brown Girl, Dead," "Black Magdalens," "Threnody for a Brown Girl," "A Negro Mother's Lullaby," "Black Majesty," and others clearly reflect a prodigious interest in racial matters. Yet for all the tension that Cullen sets up in his works between the "paganism" and "blackness" of Africa and Christianity (the ethos of the New World), he continually professed a distaste for some of the true expressions of black culture, or at least their appropriateness to literature. With no one would Cullen come more into conflict on this issue than Langston Hughes, whose works were infused with the rhythms of jazz and blues and whose love of the black masses seemed irrepressible, an argument delineated with particular emphasis in Hughes's "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,"<sup>†</sup> published in *The Nation* in June 1926. Ironically, none of Cullen's later works excited the same attention as *Color* and *Copper Sun*, and many critics believe that Cullen's best poems, including those here, concern race. Of this conundrum the poet Owen Dodson remarked, "If you asked any Negro what he found in Cullen's poetry, he would say: all my dilemmas are written here."

In the thirties, Cullen entered a period marked perhaps not as much by a frequently cited lessening of production, as much as by a turning of his talent to new forms, including fiction, translation, drama, song lyrics, and children's literature. His only novel, the satirical look at the Harlem Renaissance *One Way to Heaven*, was published in 1932 (the same year as Wallace Thurman's own biting fictional portrait, *Infants of the Spring*); in 1935, he published *The Medea*, a translation of the Greek drama. In the forties, Cullen settled into a comfortable marriage to Ida Mae Roberson, published his children's volumes *The Lost Zoo* and *My Lives and How I Lost Them*, and collaborated with Arna Bontemps on *St. Louis Women*, a musical adaptation of Bontemps's novel, *God Sends Sunday*. On June 9, 1946, the bright and morning star of the Harlem Renaissance, who seemed, perhaps, to have a gift for arriving too soon, died at the age of forty-three.