# Countee Cullen

Poet  
Born May 30, 1903, Louisville, Kentucky  
Died January 9, 1946, New York, New York

“To read Countee Cullen’s work is to hear a voice as representative of the Harlem Renaissance as it is possible to find.”
A leading figure in the Harlem Renaissance, Countee Cullen is considered to be the writer who best represents that vigorous flowering of black culture in the 1920s. The Harlem Renaissance grew out of the frustrated expectations the black community experienced following World War I. Black soldiers who had risked their lives in the war could not even find jobs. They thronged the cities looking for work, and the injustice was expressed by the intellectuals, many of whom voiced their protest through their art. Harlem and other large black communities became vibrant centers of culture, with writers and artists producing fresh new works about black life, often harking back to their African roots.

Thrifted in his adopted home

Little is known about Countee Cullen before his adoption in 1918. Even his place of birth is uncertain, though it is generally considered to be Louisville, Kentucky. The boy’s mother, Elizabeth Lucas, named him Countee LeRoy Porter and then passed him over to his grandmother, who looked after him until her death. The fifteen-year-old Countee Porter was then adopted by a minister and his wife, Frederick and Carolyn Cullen of the Salem Methodist Episcopal Church in Harlem.

In his adopted father’s home Cullen came under the influences that would shape his poetry, for the Salem Methodist Episcopal Church was a nerve center of local action. Here he heard discussions about racial injustice and the many other problems concerning the black community. His adopted father, Reverend Cullen, was an active member of the
old, the somewhat cocky young man had a succession of other accomplishments that year: he graduated with a B.A. from New York University, was accepted to a master's degree program at Harvard, and had his first book of poems published by the well-known trade publisher Harper & Row. The book was called *Color*.

**Critically acclaimed for his first book**

Many of Cullen's best-known poems appeared in *Color*. The book collected 73 poems arranged in three sections—"Color," "Epitaphs," and "Varia"—and it dealt with the major themes that were to dominate his work. The theme of racial injustice was movingly expressed in such poems as "Incident" and "Atlantic City Waiter." "Atlantic City Waiter" also emphasized African origins and a romantic nostalgia for the old days in Africa, a theme repeated in "Heritage" and many other poems in *Color*.

Despite the racial themes in the books, Cullen desired to be known as a poet, not as a black poet. His success in a largely white culture at school and university made him resent being later classified by color. This was his theme in his well-known poem "Yet Do I Marvel":

> Yet do I marvel at this curious thing:  
> To make a poet black, and bid him sing!

Because Cullen was determined to bridge the gap between black and white writers, he did not find it inconsistent to take the English poet John Keats as his model. The "Epitaphs"
section of *Color* contains poems on Keats as well as on the nineteenth-century African American writer Paul Laurence Dunbar, while the "Varia" section includes the well-known poem "To John Keats, Poet. At Springtime."

Cullen enjoyed great success with *Color*, which received excellent reviews and was awarded the Harmon Foundation’s first gold medal for literature two years later.

**Wrote his major works from France**

After completing his master’s degree from Harvard in 1926, Cullen worked as assistant editor at *Opportunity* magazine, for which he wrote a column called "The Dark Tower." In 1928 he won a Guggenheim fellowship, allowing him to travel, and he spent much of the next six years in France. Prior to leaving, he married Nina DuBois, the daughter of W. E. B. DuBois, the well-known leader of the African American intellectual community. The wedding was Harlem’s social event of the year, though the marriage failed almost immediately. Cullen had a happier second marriage, in 1940, to Ida Robertson.

By the end of the 1920s Cullen published three more poetry collections, *The Ballad of the Brown Girl* (1927), *Copper Sun* (1927), and *The Black Christ and Other Poems* (1929). Although he later published several more collections, Cullens is remembered for these earlier works.

In 1932 Cullen published his only novel, *One Way to Heaven*, but he was more successful with his stories for children. After returning from France in 1934, he taught at Frederick Douglass Junior High School in New York,
and to help inspire sound values in young people he wrote two collections of stories: *The Lost Zoo* (1940) and *My Lives and How I Lost Them* (1942).

Cullen had also been trying his hand at writing for the theater, his most noted effort being the musical “St. Louis Woman,” based on Arna Bontemps’s first novel. Objections raised about it being demeaning to blacks delayed the show’s production, but Cullen never lived to see it staged. He died of uremic poisoning three months before it opened in New York.