

Twentieth-Century  
Literary Criticism

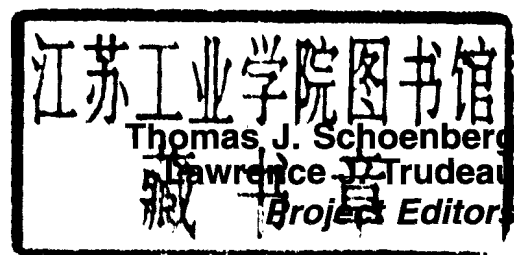
TCLC 220



Volume 220

# Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

**Criticism of the  
Works of Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,  
Short Story Writers, and Other Creative Writers  
Who Lived between 1900 and 1999,  
from the First Published Critical  
Appraisals to Current Evaluations**



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# Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

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# Preface

Since its inception *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism (TCLC)* has been purchased and used by some 10,000 school, public, and college or university libraries. *TCLC* has covered more than 1000 authors, representing over 60 nationalities and nearly 50,000 titles. No other reference source has surveyed the critical response to twentieth-century authors and literature as thoroughly as *TCLC*. In the words of one reviewer, “there is nothing comparable available.” *TCLC* “is a gold mine of information—dates, pseudonyms, biographical information, and criticism from books and periodicals—which many librarians would have difficulty assembling on their own.”

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*TCLC* is designed to serve as an introduction to authors who died between 1900 and 1999 and to the most significant interpretations of these author's works. Volumes published from 1978 through 1999 included authors who died between 1900 and 1960. The great poets, novelists, short story writers, playwrights, and philosophers of the period are frequently studied in high school and college literature courses. In organizing and reprinting the vast amount of critical material written on these authors, *TCLC* helps students develop valuable insight into literary history, promotes a better understanding of the texts, and sparks ideas for papers and assignments. Each entry in *TCLC* presents a comprehensive survey on an author's career or an individual work of literature and provides the user with a multiplicity of interpretations and assessments. Such variety allows students to pursue their own interests; furthermore, it fosters an awareness that literature is dynamic and responsive to many different opinions.

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- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose

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- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Source citations in the Literary Criticism Series follow University of Chicago Press style, as outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 15th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003).
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

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In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale also produces a paperbound edition of the *TCLC* cumulative title index. This annual cumulation, which alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in the series, is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

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# Countée Cullen

## 1903-1946

(Born Countée LeRoy Porter) American poet, novelist, critic, playwright, and children's writer.

The following entry provides an overview of Cullen's life and works. For additional information on his career, see *TCLC*, Volumes 4 and 37.

### INTRODUCTION

Countée Cullen is considered one of the leading poets of the Harlem Renaissance, a cultural movement of intense creative achievement among African American writers, artists, and musicians who primarily resided in the Harlem section of New York City during the early twentieth century. Although he authored a novel, plays, and children's verse and stories, Cullen is best remembered for his early poetic works, including *Color* (1925) and *The Ballad of the Brown Girl: An Old Ballad Retold* (1927). Throughout his brief literary career, Cullen embraced an artistic aesthetic that incorporated both the African American and English poetic traditions, seeking to bridge the distance between the two cultures through his work. His conservative approach to both form and theme served as a cornerstone of his poetic practice. Cullen often utilized traditional verse forms of European literature, such as the sonnet and the epitaph, and avoided experimenting with the jazz-influenced meters and Black vernacular employed by some of his contemporaries, such as Langston Hughes. He also explored universal themes in his verse, such as love, religion, and death, but ironically is most often remembered for his poems that treat issues of race and social injustice. After a brief period of popularity, Cullen's reputation waned, partially as a result of his adherence to traditional forms and diction. As Esther Sánchez-Pardo has noted, Cullen "was a precocious talent" at the beginning of the Harlem Renaissance, who was often referred to as "the poet laureate of the movement," but he struggled to develop his skills "between traditionalism and the New Negro modernism" and to transcend "the rigid either/or alternative between allegiance to the forms of the race and allegiance to tradition in poetry."

### BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Many details regarding Cullen's birth and early childhood are difficult to determine. He was born Countée LeRoy Porter on May 30, 1903, in Louisville, Ken-

tucky (although some accounts indicate he was born in either Baltimore or New York City). Around the age of nine Cullen moved to New York City to live with his grandmother. She died in 1918, however, and Cullen was informally adopted by the Reverend and Mrs. Frederick Cullen, who were affiliated with the Salem Methodist Episcopal Church in Harlem. It is reported that the poet was devoted to his adoptive parents and considered them his own. Cullen was educated in public schools in New York and developed an early interest in poetry. He attended DeWitt Clinton High School, a predominantly white, highly acclaimed preparatory school, where he won several prizes for poetry and served as vice president of the senior class. After graduating from DeWitt Clinton, Cullen enrolled in classes at New York University in 1922.

He continued to write during his college years, publishing poems in several leading publications, including *Opportunity*, *Harper's*, and the *Bookman*, and worked as a waiter in Atlantic City during the summers to help finance his education. In 1923 Cullen won second prize in the undergraduate Witter Bynner Poetry Contest for "The Ballad of the Brown Girl," which was later published in book form in 1927. In 1925 he also received *Poetry's* John Reed Memorial Prize for the poem "Threnody for a Brown Girl." That same year Cullen was elected to Phi Beta Kappa and earned his Bachelor of Arts degree. His first collection of poetry, *Color*, was also published that year, garnering critical praise and heralding Cullen's emergence as a major voice in Black American letters.

Benefiting from his success, Cullen entered the graduate program at Harvard University in 1925, where he studied literature and poetry writing and earned his Master's degree in 1926. In 1927 he received the Harmon Foundation Literary Award and published his second volume of poetry, *Copper Sun*. Between 1926 and 1928 Cullen served as an assistant editor for *Opportunity*, the journal of the National Urban League, and published a regular column titled after his acclaimed poem, "From the Dark Tower." During this time he also edited and published *Caroling Dusk: An Anthology of Verse by Negro Poets* (1927), in which he included some of his own work. In 1928 Cullen won a Guggenheim grant to study in France for a year. Before he left the country he married Nina Yolande Du Bois, the daughter of writer and sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois. The marriage would be short-lived, however, and would



end in divorce in 1930. Cullen extended his stay in France for an extra year and wrote the poetry collected in *The Black Christ, and Other Poems* (1929).

During the 1930s Cullen's poetic output and reputation declined. In 1932 he published his only novel, *One Way to Heaven*, and in 1935 a mixed-genre volume including poetry and the play *The Medea*. Cullen declined a number of college teaching positions in the mid 1930s, accepting instead a position teaching French and creative writing at Frederick Douglass Junior High School in New York, where he remained for the rest of his life. In the 1940s Cullen published two works written for children, *The Lost Zoo (A Rhyme for the Young, but Not Too Young)* (1940) and *My Lives and How I Lost Them* (1942). He also began collecting his favorite poems for the volume *On These I Stand*, which was published posthumously in 1947. Cullen died of uremic poisoning on January 9, 1946, in New York.

## MAJOR WORKS

Cullen's respected and well-known early work, *Color*, consists of seventy-three poems that are divided into three sections, titled "Color," "Epitaphs," and "Varia." In this collection Cullen uses a variety of traditional verse forms, including the sonnet, epitaph, and rhyming quatrains. He also explores several themes in the work, including love, death, and religion; but it is most often remembered for those poems that treat themes related to racial injustice.

The "Color" section of the volume contains some of Cullen's best-known poems, such as "Yet Do I Marvel," "Incident," "Heritage," and "Simon the Cyrenian Speaks." In "Yet Do I Marvel," the poet poses questions regarding racial identity and creativity. In considering the incongruous phenomena of the natural world, the speaker of the poem finds the predicament of the Black poet to be the most baffling. Although he does not doubt God's goodness, he declares, "Yet do I marvel at this curious thing: / To make a poet black, and bid him sing!" In "Incident," Cullen relates the experience of an eight-year-old child visiting Baltimore, who only remembers the prejudice he encountered on his trip, after enduring a racial slur. In "Simon the Cyrenian Speaks," Cullen imagines that Simon, who briefly carried Christ's cross before the crucifixion, is a Black man. In the poem Simon believes that he has been singled out because of his color but is nevertheless moved to help Christ, and as a result distinguishes himself from Christ's persecutors. Several poems in the "Color" section of the collection reflect an interest in and longing for the recovery of African culture, including "Heritage," which many critics consider to be Cullen's best poem. In this work the speaker attempts to reconcile the conflict between his desire for Christian traditions and his African heritage.

In the section titled "Epitaphs" Cullen includes verses written about poets John Keats and Paul Laurence Dunbar. "Varia," which includes the often anthologized poems "She of the Dancing Feet Sings" and "To John Keats, Poet. At Springtime," covers a variety of themes. Commentator Michael L. Lomax has asserted that "*Color* remains an impressive and landmark volume, one which quickly established its author as the New Negro poet *par excellence*."

Often considered one of Cullen's most significant poetic achievements, *The Ballad of the Brown Girl* presents a revision of a traditional English folk ballad and explores issues of racial prejudice, revenge, and miscegenation. In the original ballad, a nobleman chooses between two maidens, a "lily white" maiden, born of a high social class, and a peasant girl, described as "brown." In Cullen's interpretation of the ballad, the nobleman, Lord Thomas, initially chooses the "brown girl," who traces her ancestors back to royalty in Africa. When the "lily white" maiden, Fair London, speaks against marriage between races, the "brown girl" stabs her. Having refused to protect his wife against insult, Lord Thomas instead avenges the death of Fair London, strangling the "brown girl" with her own hair. At the end of the poem, Cullen reveals that Fair London is buried at Lord Thomas's side, while the "brown girl" is buried at his feet.

Another of Cullen's early popular works is the collection *Copper Sun*. Although not as well received as his previous volumes, *Copper Sun* contains several of Cullen's significant poetic achievements. A popular poem from the collection, "From the Dark Tower," depicts powerful and productive African American men and women planting crops, while others, "lesser men," reap their harvest. The speaker of the poem foresees a different future and declares that "we were not made to eternally weep." In the meantime, the speaker counsels his people to wait and endure. "Threnody for a Brown Girl," which is also collected in *Copper Sun*, treats the subject of death. As in several other poems written throughout his career, Cullen presents a positive interpretation of death. The speaker encourages mourners not to weep over the grave of a dead girl, because the wrongs done to her in life have been undone by death. The speaker insists that in death, the girl has knowledge of the stars, love, shame, and the origin of all things, and declares that the living "alone are children, lost" who "need elegies."

For some scholars, Cullen's later works, although not as successful or accomplished as his early volumes of poetry, are nevertheless worthy of study. His only novel, *One Way to Heaven*, is often criticized for its structural flaws, but some commentators have praised its satirical secondary plot, which features Cullen's observations of Harlem's intellectual life. The poems and prose for

children collected in *The Lost Zoo* and *My Lives and How I Lost Them* have been praised for their musicality, imagination, and subtly ironic commentary on human behavior. Cullen's translation of Euripides's play *Medea*, featured in *The Medea, and Some Poems*, has also drawn favorable critical attention. The play focuses on the character of Medea, who kills her own children in an act of revenge against their father. For some critics, the play's themes are connected to the social and political climate in which Cullen was writing. Lillian Corti has maintained that although Cullen's *Medea* is often "dismissed as an academic tribute to ancient aesthetics," it "is actually an impassioned and subversive drama which reflects an essential moment in the history of African American letters." Corti observes that "the essential theme of this play is, in short, the question of violence as an instrument of policy. In his concern with this painful issue, Cullen found a startling congruence between ancient dramatic structure and modern political discourse."

### CRITICAL RECEPTION

Cullen achieved significant critical recognition early in his literary career. With the success of his first volumes of poetry, *Color* and *The Ballad of the Brown Girl*, he was widely celebrated, by both Black and white audiences, as an important new voice among African American writers in the 1920s. Critics often favorably compared him to such poets as Edna St. Vincent Millay and A. E. Houseman, and many proclaimed that, despite incidental weaknesses in these first works, he was a serious talent with great potential as a young poet. Reactions to his next volume of poetry, *Copper Sun*, were less favorable, however, and some commentators began to question whether Cullen's work would continue to evolve. Although throughout his career Cullen claimed that he wanted to be judged as a poet, not merely a "black poet," supporters of his work tended to emphasize its themes of race and social injustice, asserting that his best work was informed by his racial experience. An increasing number of detractors, however, argued that Cullen's success was due mainly to the initial novelty of the Harlem Renaissance movement, and that the poet failed to mature artistically as the Renaissance mandate faded and America's interest in Black literature evolved. Indeed, as Cullen's poetic reputation waned during the late 1920s and 1930s, he began experimenting with fiction and the dramatic form, as well as with children's literature, but he failed to gain recognition equaling his early successes. At the time of his death in 1946 Cullen was primarily remembered as one of the first bright stars of the Harlem Renaissance and as the author of a few notable poems, such as "Heritage" and "Yet Do I Marvel."

In recent scholarship critics have begun to study issues of gender and sexuality in Cullen's work. Many schol-

ars have investigated the presence of homosexual themes and imagery in his poems, while others have focused on the poet's representations of masculinity, especially Black masculinity, in his work. Peter Powers has suggested that Cullen was popular during the 1920s, in part, because "the tensions and contradictions that drive his work embody the tensions and contradictions of his cultural context, particularly as they revolve around the definitions of masculinity, race, and religion."

A number of recent critics, such as Amitai F. Aviram, Jeremy Braddock, and A. B. Christa Schwarz, have emphasized the conflict or tension in Cullen's verse between its conventional form and diction, on the one hand, and its radical political themes, on the other. David Jarraway has highlighted the "double-consciousness" through which Cullen approached such issues as "race, sexuality, and literary tradition" in his work, underscoring the irony in any critical view of the poet that stresses a "oneness" of identity, with respect to his sexuality or his relation to the Harlem Renaissance.

Despite such recent reassessments of his work, Cullen is generally regarded today as a minor poet within the larger scope of American literature, although he is still acknowledged as an important voice of the Harlem Renaissance. As Gerald Early, noted Cullen scholar and editor, has observed, though he has been "strangely and sadly neglected in recent years, when the Harlem Renaissance has otherwise enjoyed a kind of intellectual vogue," Cullen "defined his age," more "than any other presence of the time, including Langston Hughes." Early concludes that "it must always be kept in mind that Cullen was a great poet," and that the central concern of his work "was not the triumphs of being black and not even its anguish but the conundrum of blackness" in the twentieth-century Western world.

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### PRINCIPAL WORKS

*Color* (poetry) 1925

*The Ballad of the Brown Girl: An Old Ballad Retold* (poem) 1927

*Caroling Dusk: An Anthology of Verse by Negro Poets* [editor] (poetry) 1927

*Copper Sun* (poetry) 1927

*The Black Christ, and Other Poems* (poetry) 1929

*One Way to Heaven* (novel) 1932

*The Medea, and Some Poems* (play and poetry) 1935

*The Lost Zoo (A Rhyme for the Young, but Not Too Young)* (poetry) 1940

*My Lives and How I Lost Them* (juvenilia) 1942

*On These I Stand: An Anthology of the Best Poems of Countee Cullen* (poetry) 1947

*My Soul's High Song: The Collected Writings of Countee Cullen, Voice of the Harlem Renaissance* [edited by Gerald Early] (poetry, novel, essays, play, and juvenilia) 1991

## CRITICISM

Michael L. Lomax (essay date 1987)

SOURCE: Lomax, Michael L. "Countee Cullen: A Key to the Puzzle." In *The Harlem Renaissance Re-examined*, edited by Victor A. Kramer, pp. 213-22. New York: AMS Press, 1987.

[In the following essay, Lomax argues that Cullen's skills declined from his early work, such as *Color*, to his publications after the 1920s, when, according to the critic, he "seemed to have lost whatever original ability he had had to discern between artificial feelings and personal perceptions."]

The early poems are as good as one remembers them, the later ones inferior. The puzzle is why Cullen did not merely stop growing, but was thrown back.

Helen Wolfert, *PM* [*Pembroke Magazine*], March 16, 1947

"Ladies and gentlemen!" black critic Alain Locke announced in 1926, a peak year of the Harlem Renaissance, "A genius! Posterity will laugh at us if we do not proclaim him now."<sup>1</sup> Much of Locke's time and energy, guidance and concern had been focused on the New Negro artists of the era, and now his efforts in their behalf were being rewarded amply with what he considered the unquestionably high literary standard achieved in *Color*, a first volume by the young black poet Countee Cullen. With this volume, the New Negro had taken a significant step forward, according to Locke, and, as if to prove that point, his hosannas were picked up only a little less enthusiastically by other critics not so personally involved in Cullen's career.

White reviewers were impressed and willingly admitted that Cullen's volume heralded a new and higher epoch in black American literature. "With Countee Cullen's *Color*," wrote Clement Wood in the *Yale Review*, "we have the first volume of the most promising of the younger Negro poets. There is no point in measuring him merely beside Dunbar . . . and other Negro poets of the past and present: he must stand or fail beside Shakespeare and Keats and Masfield, Whitman and

Poe and Robinson."<sup>2</sup> Most other white reviewers were not quite so unqualified as Wood and did not presume to place Cullen among such an auspicious group of English and American poets. While they did invoke Cullen's obvious and admitted literary influences, they still compared the young black poet favorably. "Much of his work is reminiscent of Miss Edna St. Vincent Millay and of A. E. Houseman," wrote one reviewer in *The Independent*, "but always it is informed with something personal to him, some quality of his own. It is never purely imitative."<sup>3</sup>

The reviewers noted that the volume betrayed certain youthful weaknesses, but they were quick to point out that *Color* suggested a potentially powerful literary talent—a fact which they felt far overshadowed any incidental weaknesses. "There are numerous things which Mr. Cullen as a poet has not yet begun to do . . . , but in this first volume he makes it clear that he has mastered a tune," wrote poet Mark Van Doren. "Few recent books have been so tuneful—at least so tuneful in the execution of significant themes."<sup>4</sup>

*Color* and Cullen did not entirely escape negative criticism, though, and significantly it was white reviewers who pointed to Cullen's arch-traditionalism and lack of stylistic originality as major flaws in his work. Locke's review had mentioned Cullen's rhyming, but glossed over it by invoking Pope as the model for what he euphemistically termed "this strange modern skill of sparkling couplets."<sup>5</sup> The white reviewers were not, however, so quick to justify Cullen's old-fashioned style. "Perhaps the only protest to Mr. Cullen that one cares to insist on is against his frequent use of rhetorical style which is surely neither instinctive in origin nor agreeable in effect," wrote *Poetry's* reviewer. "Lofty diction in poetry when it is unwarranted by feeling . . . is liable to seem only stilted and prosy."<sup>6</sup> The general silence of black reviewers on this point seems to suggest their own agreement with Cullen. The majority black critical view was that New Negro artists should express themselves in time-honored forms and thus give stature to their racial themes. By performing well, within the confines of established literary traditions, black artists would demonstrate their capabilities in a way that could not be disputed.

White reviews of *Color* included one uniform and rather predictable response. They all stated that Cullen's real importance was not merely as a black poet writing of his people's experiences but as a poet expressing the universal human experience. "But though one may recognize that certain of Mr. Cullen's verses owe their being to the fact that he shares the tragedy of his people," wrote Babette Deutsch in the *Nation*, "it must be owned that the real virtue of his work lies in his personal re-

sponse to an experience which, however conditioned by his race, is not so much racial as profoundly human. The color of his mind is more important than the color of his skin.”<sup>7</sup>

Ironically, though, it was this specifically racial element in his work which most forcefully appealed to black reviewers. “His race and its sufferings,” wrote Walter White, “give him depth and an understanding of pain and sorrow.”<sup>8</sup> White’s emphasis was echoed in other black reviews which praised Cullen as the first real spokesman for sensitive and educated blacks who daily suffered through the pressures and hardships of the American racial experience. “The poems which arise out of the consciousness of being a ‘Negro in a day like this’ in America,” wrote Jessie Fauset in *The Crisis*, “. . . are not only the most beautifully done but they are by far the most significant in the book. . . . Here I am convinced is Mr. Cullen’s forte; he has the feelings and the gift to express colored-ness in a world of whiteness. I hope he will not be deflected from continuing to do that of which he has made such a brave and beautiful beginning.”<sup>9</sup>

Certainly the “colored-ness” which Jessie Fauset praised as an essential feature of Cullen’s first volume was a quality which she sensed rather than a sentiment which she found expressed in clear and forthright statements. There were too many non-racial poems for that; and too many poems in which, as she herself pointed out, “the adjectives ‘black’ or ‘brown’ or ‘ebony’ are deliberately introduced to show that the type which the author had in mind was not white.”<sup>10</sup> At least in part, though, this inclusion of non-racial and peripherally black poems did suggest Cullen’s own particular brand of “colored-ness.” For within the context of *Color* as a whole, they implied the tentativeness of Cullen’s assertions of a strong sense of his own black identity. These poems, appearing along side verse dealing with specifically racial themes, point to the Du Boisean “double-consciousness” as the central contradiction in Cullen’s appraisal of his own racial identity. Neither black nor white, Cullen saw himself somewhere in between, an undefined individual consciousness for whom “colored” became as good a label as any. Thus, the volume as a whole and several poems in particular are haunted by the unresolved conflict in Cullen’s perception of himself as simultaneously a black man and a culturally assimilated though, admittedly, socially ostracized Westerner. This central tension became the source of dramatic conflict in Cullen’s and *Color*’s best known poem, “Heritage.” In it, Cullen confronted the contradictions within his own identity and, though finally incapable of resolving them, he articulated his emotional and intellectual struggle with honesty and a rarely-achieved eloquence.

The opening lines of “Heritage” introduce Cullen’s conflict in terms of tensions between past and present, Africa and America:

What is Africa to me:  
Copper sun or scarlet sea,  
Jungle star or jungle track,  
Strong bronzed men, or regal black  
Woman from whose loins I sprang  
When the birds of Eden sang?  
*One three centuries removed*  
*From the scenes his fathers loved,*  
*Spicy grove, cinnamon tree,*  
*What is Africa to me?*<sup>11</sup>

Africa was a frequent symbol in New Negro poetry for a pristine black identity which had not been confused by the values, “progress” and materialism of Western society. Ironically, this pastoral image bore little actual relation to contemporary colonial Africa or even to Africa three centuries before, but was instead the product of a long tradition of popular literary stereotypes. Cullen’s Africa, peopled with wild animals and “young forest lovers . . . / Plighting troth beneath the sky,” was just another literary conception—part Edgar Rice Burroughs, part courtly romance. Yet, in spite of Cullen’s historical naiveté, the essential personal problem still emerges, the conflict between a conscious and intellectualized Western self and a self which intuitively senses a bond with a lost past as well as elements of a degraded present:

So I lie, who always hear,  
Though I cram against my ear  
Both my thumbs, and keep them there,  
Great drums throbbing through the air.  
So I lie, whose fount of pride,  
Dear distress, and joy allied,  
Is my somber flesh and skin,  
With the dark blood damned within  
Like great pulsing tides of wine  
That, I fear, must burst the fine  
Channels of the chafing net  
Where they surge and foam and fret.<sup>12</sup>

Elsewhere in *Color* Cullen had attempted to establish bonds with elements of the racial present, elements which he usually excluded from the limited range of his sensitive and, admittedly, bourgeois outlook. In “Black Magdalens” and “Atlantic City Waiter” he tried to capture the meaning of experiences toward which he responded ambivalently, feeling simultaneously a sense of separation and a kind of bond as well. The results were forced and shallow, without the compassion achieved, for example, by McKay in “Harlem Shadows” and “Harlem Dancer”—poems in which the Jamaican poet establishes himself as an observer of those within the race who have been degraded, but in which he also affirms the essential humanity of those who have been thus debased. Cullen, on the other hand, though he may have chosen to observe such elements in black life,