
POETRY
Incident**Countee Cullen**

*Born in New York City, Countee Cullen (1903–1946) was a central figure of the Harlem Renaissance. A formalist and romantic poet, Cullen acknowledged Keats as his greatest influence. He published his first collection of poems, *Color*, in 1925 while he was a student at New York University. He received a Guggenheim Fellowship and published *Black Christ and Other Poems in France* in 1929. Cullen also wrote a novel, children's stories, and poems. He collaborated with his friend Arna Bontemps on a play, *St. Louis Woman*, which became a popular Broadway musical in 1946.*

“Incident” shows the insidious power of prejudice to destroy a child’s innocent view of the world. It also demonstrates that negative presuppositions about others are learned early.

Once riding in old Baltimore,
Heart-filled, head-filled with glee,
I saw a Baltimorean
Keep looking straight at me.

5 Now I was eight and very small,
And he was no whit bigger,
And so I smiled, but he poked out
His tongue and called me, “Nigger.”

I saw the whole of Baltimore
10 From May until December:
Of all the things that happened there
That’s all that I remember.

■ EXPLORATIONS OF THE TEXT ■

1. What is the nature of the interaction between the two boys?
2. Why does the speaker remember nothing more than the incident, even though he stayed in Baltimore from “May until December”?