

# COUNTEE CULLEN

Bisexual African-American Author  
(1903-1946)



In high school, Countee Cullen won a citywide competition for his poem 'I Have a Rendezvous with Life.' After graduating Phi Beta Kappa from NYU, Cullen attended Harvard. By the time he earned his Master's Degree he had become the most popular black poet in America – releasing the poetry collections 'Color' (1925), 'Copper Sun' (1927), and 'The Ballad of the Brown Girl' (1928). Soon he was the most representative voice of the Harlem Renaissance, winning more literary prizes than any other African-American author. In 1928 he became only the second African-American to win a Guggenheim Fellowship. Though romantically linked to Alain Locke, in 1929 Cullen married the only child of W.E.B. Du Bois. After her divorce from Cullen a year later, she told her father that he had revealed to her that he was sexually attracted to men. In 1929 he published 'The Black Christ and Other Poems,' but the reviews were mixed as were reviews for his novel 'One Way to Heaven' (1934). From the 1930s until his death he taught at Frederick Douglass Junior High where one of his pupils was James Baldwin. Cullen's 'Medea' (1935) was the first major translation of a classical work by a 20<sup>th</sup> century black American author. During the next few years he co-wrote the controversial musical, 'St. Louis Woman,' as well as two books for juveniles. 'On These I Stand' – a collection of his poems he had personally selected – was published after Cullen's death from high blood pressure and uremic poisoning in 1946. A branch of the New York Public Library as well as public schools in New York and Chicago bear his name.

## Lesson Plan

### Level 1: Contributions Approach

1. Activate prior experience: What writings are attributed to Countee Cullen?
2. Read the biographical information on the plaque and the information at [http://legacyprojectchicago.org/Countee\\_Cullen.html](http://legacyprojectchicago.org/Countee_Cullen.html)
3. Group Discussion: How did Cullen become an important part of the Harlem Renaissance? Listen to <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=31Nq3Xbuhts>
4. Extend knowledge: In what ways did Cullen demonstrate "I Have a Rendezvous with Life"? Read <https://poets.org/poem/i-have-rendezvous-life>

### Level 2: Additive Approach

1. Read the information at this link: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/countee-cullen> Why was Countee Cullen a central figure of the Harlem Renaissance? What set him apart?
2. Who were Cullen's greatest role models?
3. Describe the term "Négritude".
4. Website Investigation: Go to <https://legacyprojectchicago.org/explore/advanced> and search for other poets.
5. Select someone who interests you and discuss in a group any common elements they share with Cullen. How are they similar? How are they different?

### Level 3: Transformational Approach

1. What were the influences on Cullen's informal education in the 1920's? Read <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/countee-cullen>
2. In what areas were Cullen's life shaped by his university experience? [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Countee\\_Cullen#New\\_York\\_University\\_and\\_Harvard\\_University](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Countee_Cullen#New_York_University_and_Harvard_University)
3. An important dimension of his life was Cullen's ability to build relationships. Describe Cullen's relationships with both women and men. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Countee\\_Cullen#New\\_York\\_University\\_and\\_Harvard\\_University](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Countee_Cullen#New_York_University_and_Harvard_University)

### Level 4: Social Action Approach

1. What type of criticism did Cullen receive throughout his career? How did he use his poetry to discuss social issues? Read <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Countee-Cullen>
2. Listen to "Hey Black Child" at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NZ2uefuFO04>
3. How would you advocate for individuals like Cullen to be included in our "visible" social history today?