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Imagery in Countee Cullen's poetry

Leesther Thomas
Atlanta University

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IMAGERY IN COUNTEE CULLEN'S POETRY

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BY
LEEESTHER THOMAS

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INTRODUCTION

Caroline F. Spurgeon gives a viable definition of imagery:

It is the little word-picture used by a poet or prose writer to illustrate, illuminate, and embellish his thought. It is a description or an idea, which by comparison or analogy, stated or understood, with something else, transmits to us through the emotions and associations it arouses, something of the wholeness, the depth, and richness of the way the writer views, conceives or has felt what he is telling us.¹

Therefore, "in the case of the poet, it is chiefly through his images that he, to some extent, unconsciously gives himself away. The poet unwittingly lays bare his own innermost likes and dislikes, observations and interests, associations of thought and attitudes of mind and beliefs in and through the images."²

From Countee Cullen's definition of poetry, one can infer that he considered imagery to play a major role in the production of poetry:

Good poetry is a lofty thought beautifully expressed. . . . Poetry should not be too intellectual. It should deal more, I think, with the emotions. The highest type of poem is that whichwarmly stirs the emotions, which awakens a responsive chord in the human heart.³

One also gets this same impression in his response that "if verse does not strike the roots of you, for you it is not poetry. . . ."⁴

²Ibid., p. 4.
³Countee Cullen, quoted in Winifred Rothermel, "Countee Cullen Sees Future for the Race," St. Louis Argus, 3 February 1928.
⁴Chicago Daily Tribune, 5 March 1930.
In order for poetry to "strike a chord in the human heart," it must make some kind of appeal to the reader—must bring forth visual pictures, vivify ideas, and recreate experiences. Such can only be achieved through imagery, and thus, one finds Cullen painstakingly striving to appeal to the emotions with this poetical device. One successful example of this effort follows:

Some are teethed on a silver spoon,
With the stars strung for a rattle;
I cut my teeth as the black raccoon—
For implements of battle.

Some are swaddled in silk and down,
And heralded as a star;
They swathed my limbs in a sackcloth gown
On a night that was black as tar.5

Throughout his poetry, Cullen demonstrates his ability to select and couple images which pungently permeate the senses and convey his thoughts. Nevertheless, a survey of the critical studies about Cullen and his work reflects that treatment is seldom given extensively to the imagery in his poetry.

Commentary usually revolves around him as a lyricist—"Cullen is a fine and sensitive lyric poet, belonging to the classic line."6 In addition to this subject, one finds studies analyzing the concentration Cullen gives to black themes:

Undoubtedly the biggest, single unalterable circumstance in the life of Mr. Cullen is his color. Most of the life


When attention has been given to Cullen's imagery, it has usually been in general analyses of his poetry, with such appraisals as "sparkling imagery," and "richness of phrase." While these do give some description of his imagery, they fail to show how this particular facet greatly adorns, elucidates, and magnifies his genius.

Therefore, recognizing the importance of imagery in poetry in general, and the significance of it in Cullen's verse, it is my intent to examine this particular device in Cullen's poetry to discover just how markedly it contributes to the body of his poetry as a whole and how comprehensively it mirrors the character of Cullen himself.

In the chapters that follow, I will present a general introduction to Cullen the man and his poetic development; identify those sources from which he drew his imagery as well as the sensory responses which it evokes; analyze the dominant thematic patterns; and finally summarize and give a general interpretation of Cullen's poetics.

7 Redding, To Make a Poet Black, p. 109. (See also Johnson, The Book of American Negro Poetry, p. 220; and Crisis 21 (March 1926): 238.)


9 Ernestine Williams McCoy, "Keats and Cullen: A Study in Influence" (Master's thesis, Atlanta University, Atlanta, Georgia, 1975), p. 87.
CHAPTER I

COUNTEE CULLEN: THE MAN AND THE POET

I Have a rendezvous with Life

It may be I shall seek in vain
The peace of her downy breast;
Yet I would keep this rendezvous,
And deem all hardships sweet,

Sure some will cry it better far
To crown their days in sleep,
Than face the wind, the road, and rain,
To heed the falling deep;
Though wet, nor blow, nor space I fear,
Yet fear I deeply, too,
Lest Death shall greet and claim me ere
I keep Life's rendezvous.1

The 1920's heralded a rise in black nationalism and race consciousness. It was a period marked by racial pride. During World War I, there had been a shift in Negro population from the South to the North and to the cities, and, "in the very process of being transplanted, the Negro became transformed."2 Alain Locke further summarizes the transition that occurred in the Negro:

In this new group psychology, we note the lapse of sentimental appeal, then the development of a more positive, self-respect and self-reliance; the repudiation of social dependence, and then the gradual recovery from hyper-sensitiveness and "touchy" nerves, the repudiation of the double standard of judgment with

1"I Have a Rendezvous With Life," Caroling Dusk (New York, 1927), pp. 180-81.

its special philanthropic allowances and then the sturdier desire for objective and scientific appraisal; and finally the rise from social disillusionment to race pride, from the sense of social debt to the responsibilities of social contribution, and offsetting the necessary working and commonsense acceptance of restricted conditions, the belief in ultimate esteem and recognition. Therefore, the Negro today wishes to be known for what he is, even in his faults and shortcomings, and scorns a craven and precarious survival at the price of seeming to be what he is not.³

This kind of awakening in the thoughts and ambitions of the Negro, which had its principal beginning in Harlem, the Negro residential area in New York City, came to be known as the Harlem "Renaissance." Harlem became the home of a growing Negro intelligentsia—storytellers, poets, and painters.

Moreover, the renaissance was characterized and cultivated by literary achievements. The literary and scholarly works which had been produced earlier by Paul Laurence Dunbar, Charles W. Chesnutt, W.E.B. DuBois, and James Weldon Johnson were enhanced by contributions of new black writers. A kind of literary explosion occurred.

Blanche Ferguson briefly summarizes this period in relation to the black writers:

A new spirit had begun to permeate the Negro masses, and a new crop of writers emerged as their spokesmen. These young people believed that the day of the Negro stereotype—the grinning, shuffling, indolent clown—was gone. These writers of the 1920's wanted to become a part of the American scene, and they wanted to get there on the artistic merit of their work.⁴

Among the new carolers of verse including Hughes, Bontemps, McKay,

³Ibid., pp. 10-11.

Toomer, and Fisher, Countee Cullen emerged as a distinct figure of the Harlem Renaissance. This poet, who was commemorated by Charles Johnson as a "child and midwife of this (renaissance) movement," was born Countee Porter on May 30, 1903 in New York City. He was reared by his grandmother until her death in 1918, at which time he was adopted by the Reverend and Mrs. Frederick Cullen and taken to a new home in the parsonage of the Salem Methodist Episcopal Church. The initiation into this warm and receptive, yet conservative, environment was to have considerable imprint on Cullen in his later life.

James Weldon Johnson presents an overview of Cullen's youth and its influence upon him:

His youth was sheltered and discloses nothing eventful or adventurous. But all adventure is not of the highways or high seas, of the struggle in the wilds or in the arenas of the city. One of Cullen's earliest poems, "I Have a Rendezvous With Life," reveals him as an adventurer in spirit. Even as a boy he had a lively and penetrating curiosity about life, and this quality in him is the mainspring of nearly all his poetry. It is the chief reason that the body of his poetry young as he is, constitutes a "criticism of life."6

Described as a gentle, smart, mannerly, fun-loving, and sensitive youth, Cullen, from the outset, won the hearts of his newly adopted parents. Being sensitive, he was touched by the confidence and faith they bestowed upon him. He was determined to prove himself worthy of their affection and trust.

Cullen received his early education in the New York Public Schools.

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"Countee liked school. He took pride in his work, in the neatness of his notebooks." He also was an avid reader, frequenting the public library.

He acquired his high school education at DeWitt Clinton School. His enrollment at this school initiated and provided many experiences which later shaped and colored his writing. Fond of the literary arts, he became an active member of the Inter-High School Poetry Society, and it was during his time at this school that his poetic development was boosted by his winning second prize for a poem entitled "In Memory of Lincoln," in a contest by the Sorosis at DeWitt Clinton.

Immediately after receiving this honor, Cullen's initiation as a poet was further heralded by the publication of "To the Swimmer" in The Modern School. Written during Cullen's enrollment at Townsend Harris High School, this poem, "analogizes a swimmer's struggles to his own inner conflict to the experience of life. As he observes the swimmer's fortitude against the waves, Cullen feels that he too must try life's seas."

As the teen-aged Countee Cullen read his first published poem, he discovered that he could write and he resolved to do so. The story of his life is a record of the fulfillment of that resolution.

Following this prominent achievement, Cullen's artistic accomplishments multiplied. His second distinctive poem was published in The Magpie (of which he later became associate editor) and was entitled

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7 Ferguson, Countee Cullen and the Negro Renaissance, p. 9.
8 Perry, A Bio-Bibliography of Countee P. Cullen, p. 4.
"Song of the Poets." Occupying a full page, it was a series of verses in which Countee gave his impression of certain English and American poets, including Lord Byron "the Quaker poet," Longfellow "the children's poet," Poe "the atheist," and Paul Laurence Dunbar "heart's brother and blood brother." Cullen had selected poets whom he had studied.

Dunbar was one of the few black poets he had (at this time) been exposed to, and the influence of conventional language as well as forms that had been induced and nurtured by his schooling is evident by Cullen's admission of difficulty in reading the dialect verse of Dunbar, in contrast to him readily comprehending those written in "standard" English. Such exposure to the poetry of the romantics and other conventional poets caused Cullen to attack the jazz elements in Langston Hughes' poetry as being non-representative of "good" poetry. However, there was no single school to which Renaissance writers belonged. Some such as McKay followed Cullen in using conventional forms, but there were many experiments with verse in addition to Hughes' jazz and blues rhythms.

In addition to his position on The Magpie, Cullen was active in other literary affairs. "These were an editorship of the Clinton News, high school weekly, the Vice presidency of his Senior Class, and the leadership of Arista—the highest scholastic honor given at his high school." Graduating with "special honors" in 1922, Cullen had begun his ascension to poet and had heightened the love and respect of his family.

Prior to graduation from high school, Cullen (1921) had received

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11 Ibid., pp. 28-30.

public acclaim for "I Have a Rendezvous With Life" which was printed in The Magpie. "Inspired by Alan Seeger's "I Have a Rendezvous With Death!" (written about one's fate with death, the poem drew increased popularity because of the author's death shortly thereafter its publication). Cullen wanted to write about life."¹³ He looked forward to meeting whatever challenges, heights, and depths life embraced.

Cullen was curious about life and thus welcomed the rendezvous. This can be seen throughout his poetry, in which he raises questions about love, pain, death, and God. It can be seen in the inconsistencies of his canon in which he presents a "criticism of life."¹⁴

"Cullen believed that by objectifying suffering and the miseries of life in the beautiful forms of poetry, the poet is able to make a beautiful thing of the wretchedness of existence."¹⁵ "The implications of his obvious concern with the meaning of life and the place of poetry in life verily constitute a poetic philosophy."¹⁶ Therefore, for him, writing poetry was a challenge—a rendezvous.

Considering a poet to be one of the 'grandest of all men,' he drafted this letter to William Stanley Braithwaite, the eminent critic and anthologist, shortly after the publication of "I Have a Rendezvous With Life."

To introduce myself allow me to say that I am a young colored lad, 18, interested in poetry to such an extent that it is more to me than anything else. For the past four years your

¹³Ferguson, Countee Cullen and the Negro Renaissance, p. 31.
¹⁵Bertram Woodruff, "The Poetic Philosophy of Countee Cullen," Phylon 1 (September 1940): 221.
¹⁶Ibid., p. 213.
anthologies have inspired me and my greatest ambition is that someday I shall have a poem worthy of a place there . . . .17

This was Cullen's ambition and his wish was gratified.

Entering New York University in 1922, Cullen continued to climb to poetical fame. The Ballad of the Brown Girl won him second prize in the Witter Bynner undergraduate contest sponsored by the Poetry Society of America in 1923.18

The ballad is about a lord who is in love with two young ladies (one brown, the other fair) and is unable to decide on one for his bride. Accepting his mother's advice to marry for material assets, he marries the brown girl. However, the story ends in tragedy, with the brown girl killing the fair one, the lord killing the brown girl and subsequently committing suicide.

After the poem had been published, Cullen learned that in the original ballad the brown girl was not a Negro as he had supposed. The term was used to identify her as a peasant.19 This notwithstanding, the poem was favorably received by the public. It also warrants added praise for Cullen's handling of imagery.

After 1923, Cullen's poetry appeared in various nationwide journals: The Bookman, Opportunity, Crisis (the official magazine of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), Poetry and Harper's.20

17 Letter from Cullen to William Stanley Braithwaite, February 11, 1921. Countee Cullen Papers, Armisted Library, New Orleans. (Used in Microfilm copy at Georgia State University, Atlanta, Georgia, hereafter referred to as Cullen Papers).

18 Perry, A Bio-Bibliography of Countee P. Cullen, p. 5.

19 Ferguson, Countee Cullen and the Negro Renaissance, p. 49.

His undergraduate collegiate years were not only impressive in the literary aspect, for among other awards, Cullen was elected to Phi Beta Kappa. It was also during this time that he met Nina Yolande DuBois, daughter of W.E.B. DuBois, whom he later married in 1928.

At this point in his life, Cullen was also gaining new friends and acquaintances in the literary world. He began to socialize with other artists of the Harlem Renaissance, notably James Weldon Johnson, and white patrons such as Carl Van Vechten.

"Although he had received some gratifying recognition during his matriculation at New York University, Cullen's last year at the university came to a dizzying climax when Harper and Brothers contracted to publish his first book, Color.\(^{21}\) "It contains a section by the same name, and in it may be found some of Cullen's best poems. They make the reader cognizant of the inflamed memories together with the unique heritage which the race-conscious Negro must, because of his treatment, certainly have."\(^{22}\)

In addition to the section devoted to "color," there are three other divisions in the book—"Epitaphs," "For Love's Sake," and "Varia." The first division revolves around themes of racial consciousness—the pride, anxiety, and suffering of the Negro and also "atavistic yearnings" for his African heritage. Noteworthy poems in this section include "Incident," "Heritage," "The Shroud of Color," and the poem which has largely contributed to the immortality of Cullen's verse, "Yet Do I Marvel."

\(^{21}\) Ferguson, Countee Cullen and the Negro Renaissance, p. 49.

Inscrutable His ways are, and immune
To catechism by a mind too strewn
With petty cares to slightly understand
What awful brain compels His awful hand.
Yet do I marvel at this curious thing:
To make a poet black, and bid him sing!23

In "Epitaph," Cullen memorializes individuals such as Paul Laurence Dunbar, Joseph Conrad, and John Keats. In other epitaphs, he satirizes human foibles, in which "For a Lady I Know," has become the most quoted:

She even thinks that up in heaven
Her class lies late and snores
While poor black cherubs rise at seven
To do celestial chores.24

The other poems in Color are basically themes of love and death. The poems in "For Love's Sake" emphasize the "carpe diem" theme of unrestrained love.25 "Varia" encompasses themes of death. The poet looks forward to death, rather than fearing it.

Color was favorably received by reading audiences. In a letter to Cullen, Charles Johnson, editor of Opportunity, wrote:

(The poems) possess a regally measured charm about them which I have yet to find in another Negro poet. Your words are fraught with high meaning. There is beauty and magnificence in the sentiments motivating them . . . You, strangely I look to for strength, power, endurance, beauty, distilled vision . . . .26

George Dillon also viewed Color as a prophetic declaration of continued success for Cullen as a poet:

The first volume of musical verse offers promise of distinction for its author, shows him to be a young poet of uncommon earnestness and diligence . . . One feels that he will cultivate his fine talent with intelligence and reap its full harvest.27

23 "Yet Do I Marvel," Color, p. 3.
24 "For a Lady I Know," ibid., p. 50.
26 Cullen Papers.
Color, in addition to the prominence which publication in prestigious magazines had brought, established Cullen as one of the profound literary artists of the Negro Renaissance. Besides Cullen, some of the other young writers gaining fame were Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Arna Bontemps, who became a personal friend, and Jean Toomer.

Upon graduating from New York University, Cullen entered graduate school at Harvard. Pursuing a Master of Arts degree in English, he enrolled in classes in literary studies and journalism. One of the classes he enrolled in was Robert Hillyer's versification course. Hillyer, who believed that poetry was a link between the present and the past, taught the techniques of this art by assigning exercises in writing the various traditional forms of English verse.  

Cullen had studied nineteenth-century English and American writers as an undergraduate and had become particularly fond of Keats. Harvard afforded him a kind of direct contact with these writers, for there he was able to read the original manuscripts of Emerson, Lowell, Holmes, Emily Dickinson, and particularly, those of Keats.  

This exposure to Keats influenced him to so great an extent that Keats became a model for him. Cullen's lyricism was also influenced by other romantic poets. "His most characteristic lyrics show a penchant toward writing in the style of Housman, Millay, and E. A. Robinson."  

After attaining his master's degree, Cullen went with his father to the Holy Land. These travels provided enriching experiences which are

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28 Ferguson, Countee Cullen and the Negro Renaissance, p. 57.
29 Ibid., p. 56.
30 Perry, A Bio-Bibliography of Countee P. Cullen, p. 11.
reflected in some of his works. When he returned from his travels, he was appointed assistant editor of Opportunity, which enhanced his prestige and influence in the black renaissance; for his new position entailed "screening" manuscripts and offering editorial suggestions (especially to unknown blacks in the literary world), reviewing books, and commenting on the general literary scene of the day.

His position with Opportunity afforded him contact with leading spokesmen of the renaissance as well as with new talents. He was thrust into the center of renaissance activity. By frequenting parties promoting Negro arts and letters and by taking an active part in other related concerns, Cullen was seen as an illustrious figure of his day.

In 1927, Cullen became the recipient of the Harmon Foundation award in literature for his second volume of collected poems, Copper Sun. This work is divided into five sections. The first section is devoted to "color," racial themes. The second section, entitled "The Deep in Love," is an elaboration on the facets of love. "At Cambridge" includes those poems written in the English forms that Cullen had learned to execute in his versification class. The last two sections, respectively entitled "Varia" and "Juvenalia," contain poems written during his travels abroad and those written during his youth.

"Despite occasional flashes of brilliance which remind a reader of his potential for greatness, Cullen failed to distinguish himself in Copper Sun."[^31] Although it won Cullen the Harmon Foundation award, Copper Sun did not fulfill the expectations which the public had envisioned after the publication of Color:

[^31]: Turner, "Countee Cullen: The Lost Ariel," p. 73.
Between "Color and Copper Sun," Countee Cullen has grown two years older. He had not, however, come any nearer to a realization of the constituents of his talent nor their proper combinations. His poetry begins and ends in an epithet skill.32

Various other reasons have been given for the book's poor reception:

He reexamined racial themes which he had explored previously in Color. Too frequently, he wrote phrases and images which echo artistically superior passages from Percy Shelley, John Donne, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and A. E. Housman. . . . He wasted paradoxes, conceits, and sparkling images on trivial subjects and themes.33

Following the publication of Copper Sun, Cullen edited an anthology of poems by black poets of the Harlem Renaissance, Caroling Dusk. Major writers such as Dunbar, Johnson, Bontemps, Hughes, McKay, Brown, Toomer, and Cullen, himself, were featured. Cullen's objective was to demonstrate the artistic abilities of various blacks. Adamant in his belief that there was no such distinction as "Negro poetry," Cullen stated in the foreword of this anthology:

The attempt to corral the outbursts of the ebony muse into some definite mold to which all poetry by Negroes will conform seems altogether futile and aside from the facts. . . . The poet writes out of his experience, whether it be personal or vicarious, and as these experiences differ among other poets, so do they differ among Negro poets. . . . A survey of the work of Negro poets will show that the individual diversifying ego transcends the synthesizing hue.34

Here, Cullen stated the 'germ' of his aesthetics. He did not want to be stereotyped as a "Negro poet,"35 but rather felt that his ability

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33 Turner, "Countee Cullen: The Lost Ariel," p. 73.
34 Foreword, Caroling Dusk, pp. xi-xii.
35 Light 3 (September 24, 1927): 12.
to convey melodiously and colorfully the innermost thoughts, attitudes, and experiences he witnessed as a man merited him the unequivocal title of poet.

Unfortunately, Cullen, in his later works, failed to reach the zenith which his first book suggested. His third volume of poetry, The Black Christ and Other Poems (1929), was written during his stay in Paris as a Guggenheim Fellow and prior to his divorce from Yolande. This book included the dominant themes which concerned Cullen—love, death, and color—with the prevailing pessimistic tone. The major poem of "Color," the third section, is "The Black Christ," the narrative of the lynching of a Southern black man who became a friend of a white woman.36 "The statement made by Jim, the black man, leading up to the lynching, and the action of the poem, suggest the crucifixion."37 "It is the story of a miracle which converted the black narrator from atheism to a belief that Christ will save the world."38

Although the book was warmly received by some, it was severely criticized by most. Darwin Turner considered it an "impressive failure."39 Jay Saunders Redding makes perhaps the most harsh attack:

Bitter and ironic in its mood, revealing but slight narrative and dramatic powers, the poem is feeble with the childish mysticism of a bad dream, penetrating the realm of emotional

39 Ibid.
reality no more than does a child's relation of a nightmare. Here in this poem Mr. Cullen's lyricism is smothered, his metrical faults exaggerated and his fear of stern reality italicized.40

Six years lapsed before Cullen published any more poetry. During this time, he authored his only novel, One Way to Heaven (1932). "It is a story of Harlem, of two strata of life in this unique area."41 Darwin Turner assessed it as being "particularly promising" in "The Lost Ariel."

The Medea and Some Poems (1935) was the last volume of Cullen's poetry published during his lifetime. In the Medea, Cullen translated Euripides' drama of a woman scorned. "In this version, Cullen tried to make the spoken lines readable and realistic, so he wrote them in prose."42 The other poems in the volume included one of his few protest poems, "Scottsboro, Too, Is Worth Its Song."

Again, there was a lapse of time before Cullen published. After years of groping for faith, having lost his inspiration for Africa or first love, he retreated to the world of children and wrote books for that world.43 The Lost Zoo, published in 1940, was a verse narration of the animals who did not board Noah's ark. Turner comments on Cullen's occupation with this book:

He ended his productivity in a world of cats and children where, free from social and literary demands, he could evoke sentiment in a smoothly narrated tale.44

40 Redding, To Make a Poet Black, p. 146.
41 Perry, A Bio-Bibliography of Countee P. Cullen, p. 12.
42 Ferguson, Countee Cullen and the Negro Renaissance, p. 146.
43 Turner, "Countee Cullen: The Lost Ariel," p. 84.
44 Ibid., p. 88.
During the last years of his life, Cullen taught at the Frederick Douglass Junior High School in New York City. When he died in 1946, he had realized his dream as poet—the joys and the pains—and he had finally found contentment with Ida Roberson Cullen, his second wife.

A last volume of poetry entitled, On These I Stand, was published posthumously in 1942. It was a collection of selections from his six books of poetry and six previous unpublished poems.

"Countee Cullen was a unique Negro poet partly because of his upbringing and schooling, partly because of his preoccupation with verse in a formalist sense. It is this uniqueness which separated him from his black brothers" and engendered his most severe criticism.

Cullen's proclamation that he wanted to be recognized as a poet rather than a "Negro poet," during a period when emphasis was placed on the emergence of the proud "New Negro," startled his contemporaries. The proclamation of this intent and the partial fulfillment he achieved in his poetry evoked speculation and controversy which still continues today.

Some felt as Redmond that

He had not seen the underside of black life in the way that McKay (Banjo, Banana Bottom), Hughes (The Weary Blues), Fenton Johnson, and others had come to know and understand it.45

Therefore, according to Redmond, Cullen could not accurately depict the black experience.

Still another, pointedly, sought to show how Cullen differed from

45 Perry, A Bio-Bibliography of Countee P. Cullen, p. 5.
his contemporaries by comparing him with Langston Hughes, one of his most eminent contemporaries:

Cullen . . . is not that man of common clay identified with those far down as is his contemporary . . . . Langston Hughes is concerned with the Negro who is holding up the lamp post, scrubbing door knobs, cleaning floors, or banging on the ebony keys of a piano in the back of a cabaret. Countee Cullen is mainly concerned with the charms and the beauties appreciated by the higher social strata.47

Again, Redding, as in his criticism of "The Black Christ," severely attacks Cullen's black themes:

His is an unfortunate attitude, for it has been deliberately acquired and in that sense is artificial . . . . A poet untouched by his times, by his conditions, . . . is only half a poet. . . . 48

Granted that Cullen, due to his family's economic standing, was not exposed to the hardships and some of the adventures of many other blacks, the assertion that he was untouched by his times is completely unfounded; for Cullen was not immune to injustices and inflictions thrust upon blacks, as demonstrated in "Incident" and throughout his "color" themes. Color (racial consciousness) is a motif in his work. Cullen admitted that although he tried to steer clear of racial themes:

Somehow or other, I find my poetry of itself treating of the Negro, of his joys and of his sorrows, mostly of the latter, and of the heights and depths of emotion, which I feel as a Negro.49

James Weldon Johnson asserts that race consciousness was a recurring theme in Cullen's poetry and he also credits his handling of this theme


48Redding, To Make a Poet Black, pp. 108-09.

49Cullen, Chicago Bee, December 24, 1927.
to be the major facet of Cullen's greatness as poet:

He is always seeking to free himself and his art from these bonds. He never entirely escapes, but from the very fret and chafe he brings forth poetry that contains the quintessence of race consciousness. It is through his power to deepen and heighten these inner experiences that he achieves his finest work.50

Cullen's confusion about the place of race in his poetry has generally been cited as the reason for his failure to fulfill his talent as poet. "Cullen was certain that he did not want to be hemmed in—that he wanted to be accepted as just a poet—but he was not sure what constituted the most daring and accomplished freedom for an American author who happened to be Black."51

However, despite the many criticisms of Cullen's subject content, few can deny his artistic skill in developing forms and utilizing poetic techniques (rhyme, meter, language, imagery). Likewise, his keen imagination is also to be celebrated as an attribute of his genius. Considered in this respect, Cullen's poetry places him in a major chord which echoes:

This is the way
He chirped and sung
In the sweet heyday
When his art was young.
Though his throat is bare,
By death defiled,
Song labored there
And bore a child.52

52 "To You Who Read My Book," Color, p. xvi.
CHAPTER II

CULLEN'S IMAGERY: ORIGINS AND EFFECTS

I am the seed
The Sower sowed;
I am the deed
His hand bestowed
Upon the World.¹

This life is like a tree that flourisheth
With fruit and flower, gay leaf and sprouting twig.²

If a poet continually draws upon certain classes of things, certain qualities in things and certain aspects of life, for his illustrations, . . . those qualities and those aspects interested him and appealed to him.³ In making a general assessment of the sources from which Cullen extracted his images, one finds that he found poetry in all aspects of life. Particularly, he was absorbed by nature, human suffering, religion, and mythology. In this chapter, I will examine the sources which appear to have influenced Cullen most in selecting his images and the primary sense appeals stimulated by his choice of images.

It seems immediately plausible that Cullen, as any human being, would be familiar with suffering and therefore able to write about it.

¹"Suicide Chant," Color, p. 87.
³Spurgeon, Shakespeare's Imagery and What It Tells Us, p. 44.
His religious upbringing readily explains the images he chose from this area of life, and the mythological influence can be surmised as stemming from his personal reading and schooling.

However, his fixation with nature is somewhat surprising. Having been reared in the city with its non-agrarian setting, Cullen uses imagery from nature which one might expect to find in the poetry of one who daily tilled the soil. Nevertheless, if one considers the fact that Cullen was a romanticist, he can comprehend why most of Cullen's images were drawn from nature. "Especially was he intrigued by seeds, rain, and spring. His preoccupation with these sources reveals a basic concern of Cullen—new life."\(^4\)

Throughout his poetry there is an abundance of seed and planting images. One example of the seed symbolizing new life is presented in "Saturday's Child":

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For I was born on Saturday—
"Bad time for planting a seed,"
Was all my father had to say,
And, "One more mouth to feed."
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In this excerpt, the poet speaks of his father's reaction to his having been born on Saturday. His father felt that Saturday was a "bad time for planting a seed"—a bad day for beginning new life.

On another occasion, Cullen considers the seed to be the source to which man returns at the end of life as expressed in "For My Grandmother."

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This lovely flower fell to seed;
Work gently, sun and rain;
She held it as her dying creed
That she would grow again. (Color, p. 46)
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\(^4\) Sister Mary Ancele Bayne, "Paradoxes in the Poetic Philosophy of Countee Cullen" (Bachelor's thesis, College of the Sacred Heart, Fall River, Massachusetts, 1961), p. 31.

\(^5\) "Saturday's Child," Color, p. 18.
For Cullen, the seed is the essence of life—the beginning and the end and the consequent source of regeneration. His concern with the emergence of new life and the seed image is emphatic in "Suicide Chant" in which the poet asserts that he is the master of his own fate:

I am the seed
The Sower sowed;
I am the deed
His hand bestowed
Upon the world.

Pull up the weed;
Bring plow and mower;
Then fetch new seed
For the hand of the Sower. (Color, pp. 87-88)

As forementioned, Cullen is preoccupied with tilling the soil—planting and harvesting. Such references to growth and productivity suggest a kind of optimism in Cullen, a kind of hope for improvement in life, especially in the life of blacks. Therefore, one finds constant images of fruit, blossoms, buds, and new life. The image of planting and reaping is vividly reflected in "From the Dark Tower":

We shall not always plant while others reap
The golden increment of bursting fruit,
Not always countenance, abject and mute,
That lesser men should hold their brothers cheap;

The night whose sable breast relieves the stark
White stars is no less lovely, being dark;
And there are buds that cannot bloom at all
In light, but crumple, piteous, and fall;
So in the dark we hide the heart that bleeds,
And wait, and tend our agonizing seeds. (Caroling Dusk, pp. 83-84)

Eugenia Collier explicates the symbolic imagery of the planter and reaper
in this poem:

The image of a person planting the seeds of his labor, knowing even as he plants "that others" will pluck the fruit, is a picture of the frustration which is so often the Negro's lot. The image necessarily (and perhaps unconsciously) implies certain questions: What must be the feelings of the one who plants? How long will he continue to plant without reward? Will he not eventually stop planting, or perhaps begin seizing the fruit which is rightfully his?6

She feels Cullen clearly depicts the plight of blacks who not only literally plant, but labor, in some way, to add to the comfort of white society, yet are unable to reap material benefits or receive acknowledgement of having achieved. The poem is steeped with images of fruit, buds, blossoms, reaping, and planting seeds. "In the sestet, the poem itself blossoms into full-blown dark beauty. . . . The image of the buds that cannot bloom in light suggests that the Negro's experience has created a unique place for him in American culture: there are songs that he alone can sing."7

Another major source of Cullen's imagery is the rain. He found beauty in the rain just as he did in the sun. "Rain" is usually presented as nourishment for seeds, or it is expressed in such diverse images as "talking in liquid words of rain," "melody of leaves in rain," "tending roots with rains of gall," and "bodies dripping mingled rain and sweat." Rain appears as a kind of personal inspiration, a stimulant. The joy and deliverance is illustrated in "Heritage":

I can never rest at all
   When the rain begins to fall;
Like a soul gone mad with pain
   I must match its weird refrain;

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7 Ibid., p. 78.
Ever must I twist and squirm,
Writhing like a baited worm,
While its primal measures drip
Through my body, crying, "Strip!
Doff this new exuberance.
Come and dance the Lover's Dance!!
In an old remembered way
Rain works on me night and day. (Color, p. 39)

Perhaps the chief imagery source of nature that Cullen uses is the spring. In this image he coupled and catalogued various aspects of nature: seeds, flowers, grass, trees, roots, bees, birds, and fruit. Although he depicts the other three seasons, spring is predominant. Cullen's caroling of spring as a metaphor for regenerated man, the beauty of the world, and "goodness" demonstrates his sensitivity to beauty and love of life.

His most extensive and panoramic treatment of spring is presented in "The Black Christ," in which Jim the lynched victim, analogizes his unwarranted death as a result of "man murdering the spring." Spring denotes peace and innocence which ended when Jim was killed. This projection is made from the time of Jim's and the white woman's meeting up to the lynching:

Spring in a green and golden gown,
And feathered feet, had come to town;
Spring in a rich habiliment
That shook the heart and woke the spent
And sleepy pulse to a dervish beat,
Spring had the world again at her feet.
Spring was a lady fair and rich,
And they were fired with the season's itch
To hold her train or stroke her hair
And tell her shyly they found her fair.

(The Black Christ and Other Poems, p. 93)

8"The Black Christ," The Black Christ and Other Poems, p. 89.
Life for both Jim and the white woman was beautiful like spring, and both were inspired by spring's adornments. However, Cullen shows how the spring, the beauty of life, is marred:

They say, a smudge across the day,
A bit of crass and filthy clay,
A blot of ink upon a white
Page in a book of gold; a tight
Curled worm hid in the festive rose,
A mind so foul it hurt your nose,
Came one of earth's serene elect,
His righteousness being warped and flecked
With what his thoughts were: stench and smut.

(The Black Christ and Other Poems, p. 90)

Definitive changes occur when Jim and the white woman are accused of being intimate friends. Here, the poet does a masterful job of selecting images of blots, smudge, crass, clay, and worm which present undesirable, almost gross, and negative contrast to the flawless and awesome portrait of spring. According to the poet, nature adversely reacts to the accusation:

He (the white accuser) had unlatched an icy door,
And, let the winter in once more.
To kill a man is a woeful thing,
But he who lays a hand on spring
Clutches the first bud by its throat
And throttles it in the midst of a note.

(The Black Christ and Other Poems, p. 94)

He found the absence of spring to be depressing. Spring, symbolizing new life, was refreshing and evoked optimism, while winter suggested decay and affected a state of pessimism. In this instance, the conventional associations of spring and winter are accepted.

Even though Cullen reveres seeds, rain, and spring, he also finds other entities and aspects of nature to be valuable sources in providing
imagery. Among the most frequently used are the sun, stars, sea, thunder and lightning, fire, skies, and two of the most profound minor images of nature are the wind and dust. Hills and stones appear even less frequently.

Cullen's creatures of nature most often are snakes and worms and birds. The stealthy and sinuous snake is a recurring image slithering through Cullen's verse. Particularly striking is the image of lovers kissing like "snakes forged in a chain."\(^9\) The worm appears often also, usually feeding on man. Of less significance are maggots, rats and mice, bugs, hawks, and flies.

One noteworthy image is that of birds, usually chirping and singing. The image of nests is also injected, but moreso, wings fly through Cullen's lines of poetry. There is frequent mention of flying or soaring in which Cullen, himself, undoubtedly expresses his personal desire and the general need for freedom in life. This idea is also advanced in his frequent portrayal of winds—the idea of being unattached, moving, floating, care-free. In one poem the poet speaks of freedom: "I was wind and sky again, and sea, and all sweet things that flourish, being free."\(^10\) The image of wings and nest suggesting freedom is found in the description of Jim's having reached maturity, the spring of life:

There was a show of wings; the nest
Was too confined. Jim needed space
To loop and dip and interlace;
For he had passed the stripling stage,
And stood a man, ripe for the wage
A man extorts of life . . . .


\(^10\)"The Shroud of Color," Color, p. 33.
The beauty of the year,
Was on him now...\textsuperscript{11}

Izetta Robb attributes the freedom in Cullen's verse as a part of his gift, an aspect of his youth. "Blowing against our face the gay, cutting, ecstatic wind of the East, burning us with the sun, or washing us clean in cold water with luxurious tingling aftermath—all is the impetuosity of youth."\textsuperscript{12}

"Cullen's keen alliance with nature is a part of his extraordinary freedom; his own will in the matter is equally a part."\textsuperscript{13} His fascination with nature is vividly reflected in his imagery. Nature served as a reservoir of images for some of his best poetry. Not only did he find poetry in the external universe, but divulged a passionate desire to merge himself with nature as other romanticists, like Whitman and Thoreau, desired. One learns of this desire from the outcry:

\begin{verbatim}
Across the earth's warm, palpitating crust
I flung my body in embrace; I thrust
My mouth into the grass and sucked the dew;
Then gave it back in tears my anguish drew;
So hard I pressed against the ground, I felt
The smallest sandgrain like a knife, and smelt
The next year's flowering; all this to speed
My body's dissolution fain to feed
The worms. And so I groaned, and spent my strength
Until all passion spent, I lay full length 1/+
And quivered like a flayed and bleeding thing. 14
\end{verbatim}

This passage, saturated with sense appeal, describes the poet's physical attempt to merge himself with nature, to escape the plight of being black.

\textsuperscript{11}"The Black Christ," \textit{The Black Christ and Other Poems}, pp. 80-82.
\textsuperscript{12}Izetta Robb, "From the Darker Side," \textit{Opportunity} 4 (December 1926): 382.
\textsuperscript{13}Ibid.
in America. He wanted to return to the earth from which he had come. His desire was so great that he even looked forward to "worms feeding on him."

In addition to the image of seeds, rain, and spring representing new life, the image of wine symbolizing life—its sweetness and richness—also flows through Cullen's verse. He often speaks of lovers' lips as being as sweet as wine. In "The Touch," Cullen compares a lady's voice with the "sweetness of longstored wine." (Copper Sun, p. 87). The wine image also appears in "Words To My Love," in which wine and bread symbolize life and love. (Copper Sun, p. 22) Moreover, wine as a symbol of nourishment or spice in life is expressed in "Bread and Wine":

From death of star to new star's birth
This ache of limb, this throbb of head,
This sweaty shop, this smell of earth,
For this we pray, "Give daily bread."

Then tenuous with dreams the night,
The feel of soft brown hands in mine,
Strength from your lips for one more fight:
Bread's not so dry when dipped in wine.15

Here, the persona gives a voluptuous expression of life. The complaint against the awful toil in the shop is made by a soul who is tortured by relentlessness and futility in a chained existence, and then is followed by ecstatic passion.16

The second major source of Cullen's imagery is human suffering and natural decadence. His use of this source is usually found in his love-loss and racial themes. Suffering is intensely felt. In one poem, Cullen states that "pain godfathered me."17 One source of pain in Cullen's poetry

15Color, p. 83.
16Robb, "From the Darker Side," p. 381.
is the yoke. There are repeated images of one being bound or almost stifled by yokes. Blood is a recurring image. It oozes, drips, flows, and even flies through the lines of his verse.

Images of human decadence as well as natural decay are sharply acrid as shown here:

Corruption, blight, and rust
Were its reward and canker must
Set in. There were too many ghosts
Upon its lanes, too many hosts
Of dangling bodies in the wind . . . . 18

and in such instances as this:

We are diseased, trunk, branch, and shoot,
A sickness gathers at the root
Of us. We flaunt a gaudy fruit
But maggots wrangle at the core.19

The poet demonstrates his ability to sharply depict all the sides of life—the beautiful, like the spring, and the gross and repulsive aspects of life.

Another source from which Cullen drew his imagery is mythology. In many instances, a reader not familiar with Greek mythology would be confused by some of the images in Cullen's poetry, such as the never-ending stair and the fickle or tantalizing fruit and his reference to chimeras:

There is no other way to keep secure
My wild chimeras; grave-locked against the lure
Of Truth, the small hard teeth of worms, yet less
Envenomed than the mouth of Truth, will bless
Them into dust and happy nothingness.20

18"The Black Christ," The Black Christ and Other Poems, p. 82.
19Ibid., p. 70.
The ancient chimera was a fire-breathing monster, usually with a lion's head, a goat's body and a serpent's tail. "It represents above all an overwhelming threat to life and without killing it, the hero Bellerophon could win no peace or happiness." In "The Shroud of Color," "the speaker wishes to cherish and protect his chimeras. He prays for death if that is necessary to preserve them. The ancient purveyor of death becomes the purpose for living and the only things worth dying for." Cullen uses many other images from Greek as well as Hebrew mythology. David Dorsey best summarizes Cullen's use of mythology in his poetry:

Cullen does not use mythological allusions for erudition or color, but as essential and very pregnant bearers of meaning. . . . It is characteristic of Cullen's poetic technique to reverse the symbolic content of his allusions to Greek (and sometimes Christian) mythology, thereby doubling their semantic content, that is, their significance in his own contexts.

Try as one may, it is difficult to divorce oneself from his past, his rearing. Although Cullen insisted that his religious upbringing had a minor influence upon his work, a look at his work reveals that he was "bathed in the Biblical lore and tradition." Imagery from the Bible and church is pervasive in his work. "His language is rich with Biblical phraseology and illustrations. God and His adversary Lucifer, the angels of heaven, Eve, Samson, Solomon, the Queen of Sheba, Elijah, and Elisha, Jacob, Lazarus, and many more Biblical characters walk through

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22 Ibid., pp. 69-70.

23 Ibid., pp. 76-77.

24 Ferguson, Countee Cullen and the Negro Renaissance, p. 45.
Other notable religious references are bread and wine for communion and the concept of turning the other cheek. His major religious imagery is found in "The Black Christ," in which a black man, Jim, represents the Christ-figure, the crucifixion, and resurrection. In brief, Jim attacks a white man who makes lascivious accusations about him and a white woman. The image of Jim as the Christ-figure is manifest upon his return home:

Soon, however, Jim emerged from the closet where he had been hiding. To the narrator he seemed so strangely transformed that he illuminated the room. He let himself be dragged to the top of a hill, where he was hanged from a tree. While the narrator continued to mourn his brother and curse God, Jim again stepped from the closet. Then the narrator realized that Christ had substituted Himself for Jim, and, once again, had sacrificed Himself to save mankind.

Cullen sometimes uses conventional religious imagery and at other times he presents pagan views. This point will be elaborated further in the following chapter. Despite the criticisms and interpretations given on his use of religion in poetry, the fact remains that he relied upon it extensively for some of his most impressive imagery.

Because he found poetry in almost all facets of life, it is difficult to tabulate all of the sources from which Cullen obtained his imagery. Still, there are three sources which, though minor, warrant mentioning—music, the art of sewing, and geography.

Cullen's love of music is evident by his lyricism, but it is also


seen in his imagery and references to music within his verse. There is constant reference to singing and reeds and flutes. The world is described as "one clear rhyme," and he speaks of spring blowing loudly (singing). He also speaks of "spring as a pean and we the choir," (The Black Christ, p. 89) In another passage, Jim and his family are described as "three notes of breath, three scattered notes in His grand symphony, the world." (The Black Christ, p. 85)

Just as it is somewhat surprising to find Cullen so intensely fascinated with tilling of the soil, it is likewise surprising to discover his interest or attentiveness to sewing. In his poems, one finds images of knitting. One example of this is found in "The Black Christ" in which he states: "We and eternity are knit." (p. 87) He speaks of the hem of beauty and poetry with bearing a hem. Especially did fabrics appeal to Cullen. Fabrics of silk, sackcloth, and wool and ribbon are found in his poetry. Silk was his favorite and he used it in the conventional meaning of beauty and extravagance:

Some women's charms are sheathed in wool,
And some in silk and gold.27

Again, Cullen magnifies the beauty of silk in this contrast:

Some are swaddled in silk and down,
And heralded by a star;
They swathed my limbs in a sackcloth gown
On a night that was black as tar.28

To a certain extent, geography also serves as a source for Cullen's imagery, for example, the city of Jerusalem and its Wailing Wall and mention

of other places across the world appear in some of his lines. Africa is the place from which he draws abundant images: copper suns, scarlet seas, and others. However, "Africa, in his poems, is not a place but a symbol; it is an idealized land in which the Negro had once been happy, king, and free."  

Such a general analysis of the sources Cullen used in selecting imagery proves that he found poetry in all things—from nature's storehouse to religion to sewing, and even ghosts appear from time to time. Cullen neglected very few objects in choosing his images, and therefore can be compared to the persona of "One Who Gayly Sowed His Oats," "because he took of life all it could give: rind, inner fruit, and core."  

By using diverse sources of imagery, one has to acknowledge Cullen succeeds in 'warmly stirring the emotions' by "employing richness of phrase and depicting concrete objects and human forms." He evokes a response from the sense of sight, touch, sound, smell taste, and temperature. His poetry is steeped with vivid pictures, excrutiating and tender sensations, acrid and fragrant odors, sweet and sour flavors, melodious as well as bellowing and whimpering sounds, and chilling and feverish affects. 

Cullen's poetry predominantly appeals to sight. This perception is illuminated by form and color, but largely by color. Cullen shows a

30 Color, p. 61.
fascination with color and most often uses red, scarlet, and gold. Two
other color images which appear almost as often are copper and silver.

Of equal significance are the vivid contrasts which he makes by
using black and white. It is with the pairing of these two colors that
Cullen paints his most striking visual imagery. Throughout his racial
poems he presents regal, sable, bronzed, fair, nut-brown, lily-white,
milky and dusky images denoting racial color. Cullen sketches a distinct
contrast between black and white in this verse:

Locked arm in arm they cross the way
The black boy and the white,
The golden splendor of the day,
The sable pride of night.32

The Ballad of the Brown Girl projects some of Cullen's most richly des-
crptive visual imagery of black and white contrast:

The Brown Girl came to him as might
A queen to take her crown;
With gems her fingers flamed and flared;
Her robe weighted down

Her hair was black as sin is black
And ringed about with fire;
Her eyes were black as night is black
When moon and stars conspire;
Her mouth was one cherry clipt
In twain, her voice a lyre.

Her (the fair girl) skin was white as almond milk
Slow trickling from the flower;
Her frost-blue eyes were darkening
Like clouds before a shower;

Her thin pink lips were twin rosebuds
That had not come to flower,
And crowning all, her golden hair
Was loosened out in shower; (pp. 3, 5)

From this description, one sees a brown girl who appears like a goddess. The glitter denotes wealth, and one sees shiny black hair, possibly curled at the ends. Cullen depicts a kind of seductive image whose array characterizes suspense and the extraordinary. The white girl is just the opposite. She appears as a kind of fragile innocent figure, one to protect. From these images, Cullen infers the stereotype of blackness as opposed to whiteness; however, here, he does not rely on the sole colors of black and white themselves to show the distinction, but rather uses a variety of other colors and images. Because his use of imagery in racial themes will be discussed in the following chapter, I will not attempt to give further elaboration of his use of these colors.

Equally impressive visual images are found in Cullen's nature poems:

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... Spring beats
Her tocsin call to those who love her,
And lo! the dogwood petals cover
Her breast with drifts of snow, and sleek
White gulls fly screaming to her, and hover
About her shoulders, and kiss her cheek,
While white and purple lilacs muster
A strength that bears them to a cluster
Of color and odor; for her sake
All things that slept are now awake.33
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Here, the poet compares spring to a lovely woman whose beauty is so compelling that "gulls kiss her." He presents beautiful purple and white colors. There is also sound and olfactory imagery—the scream of the gulls, spring calling, and the fragrance expelled by the lilacs. In addition to such colorful and beautiful pictures, pictures of the gory and not so pleasant images in life are presented too:

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33 "To John Keats, Poet, At Springtime," Caroling Dusk, p. 185.
for life
That unto me at dawn was now a prayer
For night at night a bloody heart wrung tear
For day again, for this, these groans
From tangled flesh and interlocked bones.
(‘The Shroud of Color,’ Color, p. 31)

and in The Ballad of the Brown Girl:
He seized the Brown Girl’s rippling hair
That swung in eddies loose,
And with one circle of his arm
He made a hairy noose.

He pulled it till she swooned for pain,
And spat a crimson lake;
He pulled it till a something snapped
That was not made to break. (p. 8)

Although it is difficult to rate the degree of prominence in which
the other senses appeal, the sense of hearing is keenly matched with
sight. The predominant sounds are of music and agony. One hears melodi-
ous sounds of the poet singing, leaves of maple trees growing music,
blackbirds singing, bees swarming, as well as the music from howling winds
and tom-toms sobbing. The most dominant musical instruments are reeds
and flutes. ‘Cullen also combines liquids (l’s and r’s) with musical
diction to produce a melodious sound.’

I am no longer lame since Spring
Stood to me where I lay,
And charmed with flute and silver lute
My laggard limbs to play,
Her voice is sweet as long-stored wine;
I leap like a hounded fawn;
I rise and flow over hill and hollow
To the flush of crimson dawn!
(‘The Touch,’ Copper Sun, p. 87)

It is impossible to read Cullen’s racial poems and not hear the
sounds of choking, groaning, moaning, and whining. Other sounds are of

34McCoy, ‘Keats and Cullen: A Study in Influence,’ p. 86.
cracking and of lightning and thundering. "The Black Christ" echoes with sound:

Outside the night began to groan
As heavy feet crushed twig and stone
Beating a pathway to our door;
A thin noise first and then a roar
More animal than human grew
Upon the air until we knew
No mercy could be in the sound.

(The Black Christ and Other Poems, p. 94)

In this excerpt, Cullen describes the setting when the whites came to arrest Jim for murdering the white man. The setting is a still hour in the night when suddenly the sound of feet stepping upon twigs breaks the silence. The roar possibly signifying a gun shot and the coarse mutterings of the men all culminate in a kind of groan—a piercing yet muffled sound of human agony because of Jim's impending fate.

Cullen's poetry reflects an acute auditory sense on his part. Not only could he hear the rippling echo of sound made by rain falling upon leaves, but also was able to discern the most faint rasp of human distress. His poetry rises and falls with sound.

The primary appeals to the sense of touch are painful. Pain is overwhelmingly felt—from the physical pain of hawks tearing at one's throat to mental anguish induced by denial. Sense appeals of softness, wetness, hot and cold are secondary. Wetness is the most pervasive of these sensations. Bodies drip with mingled rain and sweat. Some of his lines are drenched from rain and storms, and dew adds its moisture.

Although the fabric silk is a repeated image, the sense appeal is usually of visual beauty rather than softness. Statements of soft hands touching and mention of one stroking hair both suggest the feel of softness.
The more coarse sensations are induced by statements such as fingers churning the world and hands fondling knotted branches.

Sensations induced by temperature are less significant in Cullen's poems. The intensity of heat is felt most often by the sun falling on bare brown thighs and by the recurring image of sweat and the heat induced by "Silence sunning me with her hot, embalming mouth, ..." 35 The biting cold is imaged by references to iciness and frost.

Appeals to the sense of smell in Cullen's poetry usually stem from the fragrances of flowers and nature. As a romanticist, Cullen was attuned to the beauties of nature and therefore could be expected to become overpowerd by its refreshing odors. Therefore, in his poetry, fragrances from flowers, pine in the air, and synthesized odors of perfume give many of his poems a kind of intoxicating effect.

Although pleasant odors are distilled through his verse, obnoxious odors are emitted occasionally. His offensive scents seldom come from concrete objects, but rather from inanimate sources, for instance, the "smell of pestilence in wind's warm breath," 36 and the scent produced by "a mind so foul it hurts your nose." 37 Cullen felt disease and an ill mind to be so abominable that they are odious.

Like his sense of smell, Cullen's sensations of taste are sweetly flavored, with burning and brackish tastes occurring infrequently. Honey and wine are the chief sources of sweetness. Spring is presented as "a sweetmeat to our tongue." 38 There is sweetness in kisses because lovers'

35 "After a Visit," The Medea and Some Poems, p. 91.
37 "The Black Christ," ibid., p. 94.
38 Ibid., p. 89.
lips hold wine. Wine is considered to be the basic and most beneficial sustenance for hunger and thirst:

Juice of the first
Grapes of the vine,
I proffer your thirst
My own heart's wine

Drink while my blood
Colors the wine,
Reach while the bud
Is still on the vine . . . 39

Wine also acts as a kind of spice for other foods; for "bread's not so dry when dipped in wine." ("Bread and Wine," Color, p. 83.)

Hunger and thirst are salient images in themes of love:

Although yourself no more resigned to me
Than on all bitter yesterdays I knew,
This half a loaf from sumptuous crumbs your shy
Reneging hand lets fall shall make me blest.40

Here, in "Oh, For a Little While Be Kind," the persona hungers for love. Having been ignored and treated coldly in the past, he presently craves affection. His hunger is so great that he begs for "half a loaf" of bread—just a little tender loving affection. Bread is symbolical of love. Again, food images represent love and the source of fulfillment:

She gave her body for my meat,
Her soul to be my wine,
And prayed that I may be made complete
In sunlight and starshine.

With such abandoned grace she gave
Of all that passion taught her,
She never knew her tidal wave
Cast bread on stagnant water.41

40 "Oh, For a Little While Be Kind," ibid., p. 77.
41 "Sacrament," ibid., p. 82.
In "Sacrament," a woman has given herself completely to her lover in an attempt to satiate his needs, but her giving was futile. Another example of feeding is given in "Dialogue":

Who sings by unseen hands is fed  
With honeyed milk and warm, white bread;  
His ways in pastures green are led,  
And perfumed oil illumes his head;

His cup with wine is surfeited,  
And when the last low note is read,  
He sings among the lipless dead  
With singing stars to crown his head.42

Food images are presented as the reward for those who have faith in God. Honeyed milk, warm, white, bread, and wine are presented as the most delectable delicacies.

Analysis of Cullen's sense appeals not only reveals his genius to stimulate individual senses but also to describe one sensation by giving appeals to another sense. Thus, one senses smell through an appeal to touch:

Man and dog sniff the wind alike,  
For the new smell hurts like a spike  
Of steel thrust quickly through the breast.43

Another example is the appeal of sight through sound:

When such hot venom curled his lips  
And anger snapped like sudden whips  
Of lightning in his eyes, her words—  
Slow, gentle as the fall of birds... . .  
Spread out their wings and slowly waft  
Regretfully back to the earth—44

Such a brief study of the sources and sense appeals of Cullen's

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42 "Dialogue," ibid., p. 97.
43 "The Black Christ," The Black Christ and Other Poems, p. 89.
44 Ibid., p. 79.
poetry magnifies his ability to capture the quintessential facets of objects and feelings. He delved all areas of his environment and the recesses of his mind for ingredients which would savor his ideas and at the same time salvage and convey their innate meanings. As a consequence of choosing sweet and bitter, fragrant and pungent, mellow and rumbling, coarse and smooth, and colorful and neutral images, Cullen gives his work "gracefulness, litheness, swiftness, and beauty."  

45 Robb, "From the Darker Side," p. 382.
CHAPTER III
THEMATIC IMAGERY PATTERNS

Inscrutable His ways are, and immune
To catechism by a mind too strewn
With petty cares to slightly understand
What awful brain compels His awful hand.
Yet do I marvel at this curious thing:
To make a poet black, and bid him sing!¹

Just as Cullen's poetry is steeped with diverse images and sense
appeals, it is also characterized by various themes. Throughout his
verse, there are three principal recurring themes: racial consciousness,
love, and death, with religion and beauty being secondary. For an in-
depth understanding of Cullen's imagery, it is necessary to analyze his
handling of images in his themes. In this chapter, I will discuss Cullen's
use of imagery in enhancing and elucidating predominant themes and ideas.

"Cullen in his youth had believed his life to be woven all of
dreams. Too soon he awoke to find that life is fashioned from the warp
of our own being and interwoven with the woof of our surroundings. . . .
He wanted to be considered a poet, not a Negro poet; yet he could not
become sufficiently detached from the theme of his race to write ob-
jectively."² Therefore, race consciousness is a dominant theme in Cullen's
poetry, and in presenting this theme, he constructs some of his most

¹"Yet Do I Marvel," Color, p. 3.
colorful and touching images.

He vividly depicts the anguish, humility, pain, struggle, as well as the joy and pride of being black in America. Black and white colors give his poetry a distinct contrast. He carefully selects an array of synonyms which denote blackness in contrast to whiteness. The most abundant of those reflecting blackness are sable, bronzed, dusky, jet, night, ebony, dark, and twilight, and Cullen was fascinated by the color, brown. In contrast to these dark hues are images of paleness: milk, fairness, light, and golden reflections. In "The Black Christ," he speaks of Jim's mother as "Job's dark sister," of strong bronzed men, and regal black women in contrast to his "fair brethren" and their "milk white maidens." One explicit example of his ability to select appropriate synonyms to depict color is seen in his description of the brown girl:

And legend claimed that a dusky queen
In a dusky dream-lit land,
Had loved in vain and died of it,
By her own slim twilight hand.3

Quite often, Cullen laments his having been born black, as evidenced in "The Shroud of Color." In this poem, the poet expresses disgust in his having been born black in a world which appears to penalize him for his color. He considers his blackness to be a shroud—a deterrent to happiness. He is confined and wants to escape through death:

"Lord, being dark," I said, "I cannot bear
The further touch of earth, the scented air,

Lord, being dark, forewilled to that despair
My color shrouds me in, I am as dirt
Beneath my brother's heel.4

Blackness here is presented as a negative attribute, and it is intensified by the simile, "as dirt beneath my brother's heel." To be black is to be of the lowest status. In another poem, the black man is imaged as dirt:

Rich mistresses with proud heads high
This dirt and I are one to them,
They flick us both from the bordered hem
Of lovely garments we supply:
But I and the dirt see just as high
As any lady cantering by.5

Jim's mother speaks of how proud white women regard her as dirt; however, she knows that she is not inferior to them.

In "The Shroud of Color," another complaint is that blacks are unable to enjoy the simple pleasures of life. Being black is also costly: "I strangle in this yoke drawn tighter than the worth of bearing it, just to be man."6 The yoke is the second image of confinement. "The Shroud of Color" is "weighted down with the burden of color."7 Nevertheless, at the end of the poem, some consolation is found:

And somehow it was borne upon my brain
How being dark, and living through the pain
Of it, is courage more than angels have.8

The black man surpasses the status of angels and takes on an almost "God-

5"The Black Christ," On These I Stand, p. 108.
8Color, p. 34.
like" image. This Christ-like image is further developed in "The Litany of the Dark People," in which an analogy is made between the hardships that blacks face and the ordeal of Christ crucified:

Our flesh that was a battle-ground
Shows now the morning-break;
The ancient deities are drowned
For Thy eternal sake.
Now that the past is left behind,
Sling wide Thy garment's hem
To keep us one with Thee in mind.
Thou Christ of Bethlehem.

The thorny wreath may ridge our brow,
The spear may mar our side,
And on a scented bough
We may be crucified.
Yet no assault the old gods make
Upon our agony
Shall swerve our footsteps from the wake
Of Thine toward Calvary.

And if we hunger now and thirst,
Grant our withholders may
When heaven's constellations burst
Upon Thy Crowning day,
Be fed by us, and given to see
Thy mercy in our eyes,
When Bethlehem and Calvary
Are merged in Paradise.9

The image of the black man's flesh as a battle-ground alludes to his having been literally beaten and tortured, in addition to suffering the mental anguish induced by whites. Yet, black people are portrayed as holding steadfast to their faith in God and a better day.

The "thorny wreath" and "spear that mars," all borne by Christ, are assigned to the black man's burden. The white wood and scented bough represent the trees from which black men have been hanged as Christ

9On These I Stand, p. 53.
was crucified on the cross. The likeness to Christ is heightened in the last stanza in which the dark people pray that on Judgment day the whites will see the mercy and forgiveness in their eyes—indicative of Christ's forgiveness of man.

One of the most emphatic images of the black man as Christ appears in "The Black Christ" which deals allegorically with a black man who is unjustly punished. The attitude of the man while dying and the inspiration that his death gives his brother culminate in the Christ-like portrait of the black man.

"From the Dark Tower" presents a picturesque image of the black man struggling. He is a planter, producing harvests from which lesser men (whites) benefit. The Negro's station in life is elucidated by his weeping and bending to provide others with fruits which he cannot enjoy. The poet gives a striking contrast of the beauty and quality of blackness to whiteness: "the night whose sable breast relieves the stark white stars is no less lovely being dark."\(^{10}\) The night and its blackness is beautiful because it is dark. The black man is comparable to "buds that bloom in the dark."\(^{11}\) There is something unique about being black; therefore, the Negro continues his task as planter and waits for a time when he will profit from his own labor.

An equally sorrowful image of the black man is projected in the depiction of his scars, inflicted by the white man, as roots:

\begin{quote}
If for a day joy masters me,
Think not my wounds are healed;
\end{quote}

\(^{10}\) Caroling Dusk, p. 184.

\(^{11}\) Ibid.
Far deeper than the scars you see,
I keep the roots concealed.

They shall bear blossoms with the fall;
I have their word for this,
Who tend my roots with rains of gall,
And suns of prejudice.\(^\text{12}\)

Although the black man may at times appear to be happy, he is never free from pain and anxiety. The scars that the black man bear are so deep, so profound, that the poet images them as having roots which receive nourishment and thus blossom—become more visible to the eye—once they are fed with rains of gall,\(^\text{12}\) physical and mental abuse induced by whites because of their hatred, and with "suns of prejudice," hatred compounded.

Although he often presents the sorrowful and somber aspect of belonging to the dark race, Cullen never fails to comment on the pride in being black:

Her walk is like the replica
Of some barbaric dance
Wherein the soul of Africa
Is winged with arrogance

\[\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\]

My love is dark as yours is fair,
Yet lovelier I hold her
Than listless maids with pallid hair
And blood that's thin and colder.\(^\text{13}\)

The dark woman is imaged as an African goddess. Her voice is comparable to that of a reed releasing golden notes. Her darkness is an asset of exotic beauty in comparison to the "listless maids with pallid hair and blood that's thin and colder. The white woman is stereotyped as cold and


\(^\text{13}\)"A Song of Praise," \textit{Color}, p. 4.
undesirable. Praise of the black woman in comparison to the white is found here also:

Who lies with his nut-brown maiden,
Bruised to the bone by her sin-black hair,
Warmed with the wine that her full lips trade in,
He lies, and his love lies there.14

The nut-brown maiden is imaged as radiating warmth and sincerity, while the white maiden exudes coolness and a lack of compassion. Unfortunately, in this appraisal of the black woman, a negative association of blackness—sin-black hair—is given. Blackness was given the connotation of evil (sin) by whites. In a few other instances blackness is given this negative stereotype:

Lord Thomas caught her as she fell,
And cried, "My sweet, my fair,
Dark night has hid the golden sun,
And blood has thicked the air.15

Cullen found it impossible to divorce himself from his race. The pictures of brown faces, crinkled hair, thick lips of wine, and lynchings were always with him. Of paramount concern to him was the phenomenal reasoning of God in making a poet black and bidding him to sing. Most of his images of race are portraits of physical color and suffering. He also considers Africa to be symbolic of black roots and pride.

In considering the patterns of imagery in his racial themes, it is difficult to assess them either as an affirmation or a renunciation of race. Moreover, he appears to accept his condition for what it is:

14 "Song of Praise," On These I Stand, p. 102.
So I lie, whose fount of pride,
Dear distress and joy allied,
Is my somber flesh and skin . . . .

His blackness is both a source of pride as well as of anguish. Cullen has received favorable commentary on his ability to "handle black anger, black grief, and black pathos in amusingly antiquated poetic clothing." It has been said that his "forte was his ability to express colored-ness in a world of whiteness."

So many ways love has none may appear
The bitter best, and none the sweetest worst,
Strange food the hungry have been known to bear,
And brackish water slakes an utter thirst.
It is a rare and tantalizing fruit
Our hands reach for, but nothing absolute.

Cullen's poetry shows an intense preoccupation with the theme of love—its beauty, pain, security, and brevity. Love is conventionally bitter and sweet. It is nourishment for a hunger in man which food will not satiate. It is a salty, yet quenching, release for thirst. Finally, unable to exactly image love, the poet resolves that it is a kind of fugitive and tempting fruit which man endlessly seeks to attain.

The gustatory image of love is projected in "The Ballad of the Brown Girl" in which the lord sings to the dead ladies:

O lovers never barter love
For gold or fertile lands,
For love is meat and love is drink
And love heeds love's commands.

18 Crisis 31 (March 1926): 238.
19 "Sonnet," On These I Stand, p. 150.
The lord is referring to the brown girl's material assets for enticing him and his decision to marry her because of them. His view is that adoration of such goods does not profit fruitful benefits. Love is a basic and invaluable property just as significant as meat and drink are to man's survival. Consequently, love cannot be bartered. It cannot be induced at will. The lord loved the fair girl and it was fate that he would die loving only her.

"In his poetic philosophy, love is a beautiful ideal in life. ... In his cynical realism, love is a variable; and in his subjective idealism, love is an absolute."\(^{21}\)

Subjectively speaking, Cullen considered love to be immortal. Nothing could dissolve the bond between him and his loved one:

I know that nothing lovely shall prevail
To win from Time and Death a moment's grace;
At Beauty's birth the scythe was honed, the nail
Dipped for her hands, the cowl clipped for her face.
And yet I cannot think that this my faith,
My winged joy, my pride, my utmost mirth,
Centered in you, shall ever taste of death,
Or perish from the false, forgetting earth.
You are with time, as wind and weather are,
As is the sun, and every nailed star.\(^{22}\)

In his ideal image of love, the poet found love to be unselfish:

... Love is the nobler way
Of courtesy that will not feast aware
That the beloved hungers, nor drink unless
The cup be shared down to the last sweet dregs.
... This is love's way,
That where a heart is asked gives back a heart.\(^{23}\)

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\(^{22}\)"Sonnet," The Medea and Some Poems, p. 85.

\(^{23}\)"Love's Way," On These I Stand, p. 62.
Love is also beautiful and ideal because it offers security:

And love is shelter from the rain,
And scowling stormy skies;
Who casts off love must break his heart,
And rue it till he dies.24

Cullen sees love as shelter. In providing warmth, it protects one against loneliness and gives one strength when faced with difficult tasks. Failure to respond to love, causes regret for the rest of one's life.

In addition, love, for Cullen, is ideally as beautiful as flowers and as enchanting as a fairy tale; yet he, in this instance, asserts that "the endless chronicle was never made; nor, save in dreams, the ever-scented rose."25 Cullen pens these lines in "At a Parting," in which the persona and his love are keenly aware of the fact that although love brings joy, that joy is not eternal. Just as flowers fade and fairy tales end, love, as everything else, is subject to end. This idea of the brevity of love is also seen in "If You Should Go," in which love is a dream.

In his consideration of love as a variable, Cullen images love as dew:

I tell you love is like the dew
That trembles on the grass. . . .
You swear no other lips but mine
Have clung like this to yours,
But lass, I know how such strong wine
Draws bees and flies by scores.
I now voluptuously bask
Where Jack tomorrow will,
And while we kiss, I long to ask,
"What girl goes up that hill?"26

25 "At a Parting," ibid., p. 94.
26 "En Passant," Copper Sun, p. 23.
Love is comparable to the dew which falls upon the grass at dusk and disappears at the first ray of sunlight. Love is, accordingly, as unstable. The persona in this poem doubts the sincerity of his lady when she states that no other person has kissed her as he does. He bases his doubt on the fact that her lips are as sweet as wine and therefore attract men like bees and flies. (Wine is a symbol of sweetness in Cullen's poetry). The inconstancy of love is further illustrated by the persona's admission of his desire to know the young lady passing nearby.

Themes about the deceptiveness of love are also found in Cullen's love poems. In "Every Love," love is depicted as some of the most stealthy creatures of nature:

Mine is the heart that like an egg love sucks
Sly Love the weasel, Love the fox, the asp,
Love wearing any guise that rends or plucks
Slits with hid fang, binds with a golden clasp.

This pain is my sore heart's unique distress,
An alien humor to the common brood,
Invading once in time our littleness,
Mingling a god's disease with mortal blood
Surely this visitation is divine;
No breast has fed a malady like mine.27

The image of the heart as an egg is unique in this poem, and it is made even more striking by the personification of love as an animal that "sucks" the heart. Cullen, in choosing the fox, weasel, and the asp, selects animate representations of evasiveness and deceptiveness. Such images are chosen to point out that one may profess love when no emotion is felt, and that by pretending, one hurts another—"slits with fang,"

27 The Medea and Some Poems, p. 75.
"rends or plucks," and even "binds with a golden clasp," which quite possibly refers to a wedding band. Many marry under the pretense of love when they have ulterior motives. However, despite the feeling that love is deceptive, it is also felt that because it is so mystifying, it must be in some way heavenly inspired, originally. Here, too, a conventional idea that love is a malady is also expressed.

"Bright Bindings" is a continuation of the theme of the deceptive-ness of love. In this instance, the lover is blinded by the exterior image of his love until he becomes acquainted with her. Another rare analogy is made in equating love to a book:

Young love to me was like an unread book
Bright-backed with smooth pages yet unslit;
Fondly as a lover, foolishly, I took
It from its shelf one day and opened it.
Here shall I read, I thought, beauty and grace,
The soul's most high and awful poetry:—
Alas for lovers and the faith they place
In love, alas for you, alas for me.

I have but read a page or two at most,
The most my horror-blinded eyes may read.
I find here but a windy tapering ghost
Where I sought flesh gifted to ache and bleed.
Yet back you go though counterfeit you be,
I love bright books even when they fail me.28

The persona is impressed by the external nature of his love as one might be impressed by the "bright-backed" cover of a book and its "white pages unslit." He had supposed his love to be innocent and pure, comparable to white pages unslit. However, after becoming acquainted with her, as in reading a book, he discovers that she is not what she appears to be. His love is counterfeit. Cullen reveals the richness and vitality of his

28 "Bright Bindings," On These I Stand, p. 96.
imagination in selecting a book and the term counterfeit to represent love. He also includes one of his occasional ghost images.

Pessimism is often expressed in Cullen's themes of love. Especially is this found in the pathetic physical descriptions of lovers as expressed here:

Weary, restless, now fever's minion, furnace hot,
Now without reason shivering prey to some great dread;
Trusting, doubting, prone to reveal, yet wishing not
To name this malady whereby his wits are led,
Trapped in this labyrinth without a magic thread.

His plight so piteous, his proper pain so rare,
The very bread he eats so dry, so fierce his thirst,
What shall we liken such a martyr to? Compare Him to a man with poison raging in his throat,
And far away the one mind with an antidote.29

The lover is pictured as one taken ill by the malady, love. One sees the image of one restless and shivering while at the same time one can imagine how the lover feels to be burning with fever. One also is able to imagine the sensational taste induced by dry bread and the dryness which comes when the throat needs water. An even more vivid image is the possible sight of a man gagging in an attempt to regurgitate the poison in his throat. The lover is portrayed as an almost mad individual, instead of a jubilant character. Love, here, is lethal. Again, this pathetic image of one in love is seen in "Pity the Deep in Love":

Pity the Deep in Love;
They move as men asleep,
Traveling a narrow way
Precipitous and steep.

Tremulous is the lover's breath
With little moans and sighs;
Heavy are the brimming lids
Upon a lover's eyes.30

"Variations on a Theme" is a dramatized example of the suffering and anxiety that follows the loss of love. Not only does it affect the lover adversely, but it also affects inanimate objects in the lover's environment:

This house where Love a little while abode,

The old house crumbles bit by bit;
Each day I hear the ominous thud
That says another rent is there
For winds to pierce and storms to flood.

My orchards groan and sag with fruit;
Where, Indian-wise, the bees go round;
I let it rot upon the bough;
I eat what falls upon the ground.

The heavy cows go laboring
In agony with clotted teats;
My hands are slack; my blood is cold;
I marvel that my heart still beats.

I have no will to weep or sing,
No least desire to pray or curse;
The loss of love is a terrible thing;
They lie who say death is worse.31

This poem is saturated with images of pain. When love goes, there is a general mourning by all things which had some contact with the former lover. The house that the lover lived in disintegrates slowly. Thudding sounds are made and the structure of the house becomes disjointed. The orchard sagging with fruit takes on the image of a pregnant woman, very much with child; its load is so heavy that it actually groans. This groaning

30 On These I Stand, p. 54.
31 Copper Sun, p. 25.
compounded with the buzzing sound made by bees as they swarm around the fruit trees produces a woeful tune, which reaches its zenith by the additional sorrowful mooing sound made by the cows who trudge along in pain because they have not been milked by the forsaken lover. Love, here, is sheer torture. This feeling climaxes with the lover's description of his physical feeling of numbness in which his blood is cold, and he is unable to express any emotion. Death is considered a more desirable end than unrequited love.

In contrast to this theme of love, Cullen occasionally cites themes in which the unrequited lover spends time recovering from rejection:

Now I am cooled of folly's heat,
My tides are at an ebb,
And I no longer find it sweet
To play fly to your web.

Now I have back my heart again,
My feet have sprouted wings;
My tongue imprisoned long in pain,
Unlocks itself and sings.32

The persona's affection has cooled. His feelings now are gone as tides return to the sea. Now free as a bird, he is able to sing and go forth enjoying life.

"Although pessimism appears to be the most pervasive note in which Cullen sings of the ephemeral quality of love, rarely does he fail to give it a sudden ironic turn that raises it above pathos or peevishness."33

In writing about all facets of love—the agony and the ecstasy—Cullen demonstrates his ability to identify scrupulously and capture vividly, in

32 "Interlude," The Medea and Some Poems, p. 77.
pictorial images, the essence of an emotion to such an extent that the reader is in some instances moved to a point of catharsis.

Soon every sprinter,  
However fleet,  
Comes to a winter  
Of sure defeat:  
Though he may race  
Like the hunted doe,  
Time has a pace  
To lay him low

Soon we who sing,  
However high,  
Must face the Thing  
We cannot fly.  
Yea, though we fling  
Our notes to the sun  
Time will outsing  
Us every one.

All things must change  
As the wind is blown;  
Time will estrange  
The flesh from the bone.  
The dream shall elude  
The dreamer's clasp,  
And only its hood  
Shall comfort his grasp.34

Following race consciousness and love, death is the next prominent theme in Cullen's poetry. "Always he woos death as a lover. If there is such a thing as a death complex, Countee Cullen has it. He might be better (poet) if his muse were less morbid."35

In wooing death, Cullen speaks of the joys and comforts which death brings. It is amorous, a constant lover. Death is consolation for the poor:

In death alone is what consoles; and life  
And all its end is death; and that fond hope


35Cullen Papers.
Whose music like a mad fantastic fife
Compels us up this ridged and rocky slope.
Through lightning, hail and hurt of human look,
Death is the vibrant light we travel toward,
The Mystic Inn forepromised in the Book
Where all are welcomed in to bed and board.

An angel whose star-banded fingers hold
The gift of dreams and calm, ecstatic sleep
In easier beds than those we had before,
Death is the face of God, the only fold
That pens content and every-happy sheep,
To Paradise, the only open door.36

The end in life is death, thus, death is a gain. Death plays music and attracts us to it. It is a source of light, guidance, to a better world as specified in the Bible. Unlike the usual thought of a distant world of dread and darkness, death is glorious—the image of an angel, the face of God—and it affords man ecstatic joy and complaisance through sleep. Furthermore, it brings man to Paradise, the imaged setting of beauty, joy, and perfection.

Again, death is considered a deep sleep—a welcomed darkness to blot out the brightness of the day:

Speed then that longer, darker eve,
Which heavy dream nor light shall break,
Nor Day's white sword pierce through and grieve,
Where Death's full bosom bids us take,
And every thirst we knew to slake.37

Death, here, is like a woman offering security at her bosom and providing sustenance for man's needs.

Death also is said to make man wise. One learns "how far the roots

36"Death to the Poor," On These I Stand, p. 157.
37"Sleep," The Medea and Some Poems, p. 75.
of flowers grow and how long a seed must rot to grow.\textsuperscript{38} In other instances, it is said to provide man immunity to pain, love, hatred and other concerns which dominate life. This idea of gaining wisdom through death is also expressed in this statement:

\begin{quote}
And as my day throbs into dusk,
This heart the world has made to bleed,
While all its red stream deathward flows,
Shall comprehend just why the seed
Must agonize the rose.\textsuperscript{39}
\end{quote}

Death is another instance is considered an "everlasting flower and a cubicle of earth to which his lease will not expire."\textsuperscript{40} It is depicted as a house, a place of shelter where its tenants may dwell without worrying about security. However, contrary to this persona's belief in the favorable attributes of death, he does not welcome it but wants to live and bear pain as well as the happiness found in life.

In contrast to the positive image and attitude of death, it is at other times a "hungry gamin gnawing on you like a beaver on a root. . . . It is a thief whose nimble fingers rifle your heartbeats one by weary one. . . ."\textsuperscript{41} Death produces an eerie sensation which results in pain because its

\begin{quote}
. . . shears snarl through my thread,
Dismembering it strand by strand,
While I hang poised between the dead
And quick, into omniscence fanned,
My mind shall glow with one rich spark
Before it ends in endless dark.\textsuperscript{42}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{38}"The Wise,"\textsuperscript{39}"Two Thoughts of Death,"\textsuperscript{40}"Protest,"\textsuperscript{41}"Lines to Our Elders,"\textsuperscript{42}"Two Thoughts of Death,"
One is able to visualize his body gradually becoming disjointed—the body's fibers disintegrating. This image is analogous to the concept of the body's transformation from flesh to dust. Again, the idea of one gaining some insight is expressed and the highly theorized idea of death as perpetual darkness is stressed.

Notwithstanding death's prowess, Cullen expresses his belief in immortality. Death is not the end, but a kind of advancement for the future of the dead:

Life who was not loth to trade her
Unto death, has done
Better than he planned, has made her
Wise as Soloman.

Now she knows the Why and Wherefore,
Troublous Whence and Whither,
Why men strive and sweat, and care for
Bays that drop and wither.

Pluck no flower lest she scream;
Bruise no slender reed,
Lest it prove more than it seem,
Lest she groan and bleed. . . .

. . . She has fled; we cannot follow
Further than this mound.
We who take the beaten track
Trying to appease
Hearts near breaking with their lack,
We need elegies.43

In dying, the brown girl has become as wise as Soloman. Even more significant, she has transcended the grave. However, Cullen does not appear to have the spiritual idea of transformation in mind, but rather suggests the idea of reincarnation in his suggestion of the girl's return to life

43 "Threnody For a Brown Girl," Copper Sun, pp. 5-6.
as a flower or reed. Death is a profit for the girl which the living cannot benefit. Cullen, here, expresses a religious belief that it is not the dead but the living who are to be lamented.

For Cullen, death has many faces. In his poetry, he describes the many images which all men at some time envision death to be—haven, resting place, prison, dungeon, thief, enemy. Because of his preoccupation with themes of death expressed in a positive tone, it is not illogical to conclude that Cullen considered death to be a reward, or he was able to willingly accept it as a just part of life:

Birth is a crime
All men commit;
Life gives them time
To atone for it;
Death ends the rhyme,
As the price for it.^[44]

Religion is another theme which is found in many of Cullen's poems. "Countee Cullen spent most of his life trying to bridge the gap between a 'Christian upbringing and a pagan urge.' How can the educated Afro-American, Cullen seems to ask, remain true to his native instincts and feelings while he wears the mantle of European 'respectability'?^[45] Cullen found it difficult to acknowledge God without belittling his African heritage:

Father, Son, and Holy Ghost
So I make an idle boast;
Jesus of the twice-turned cheek,
Lamb of God, although I speak
With my mouth thus, in my heart
Do I play a double part^[46]

^[44]"For a Cynic," Color, p. 47.
Cullen implies that by turning his cheek God has failed to recognize the problems of blacks. Although he praises God, he admits that he is not steadfast in his belief. In his heart, he doubts the "goodness" of God. The poet images himself as a hypocrite in his acknowledgement of God as the Supreme Being and saviour of man.

Because of his constant awareness of the plight of blacks in Christian America, Cullen was forced to question the true nature of God as saviour when so many members of his race were suffering and dying because of white abuse. He sought to resolve this conflict through prayer, admitting that he was a pagan at heart, but still clinging to some hope that there was a chance for blacks through Christ:

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Not for myself I make this prayer,
    But for this race of mine
That stretches forth from shadowed places
    Dark hands for bread and wine.

       ...........................................

For me, I pay my debts in kind,
    And see no better way,
Bless these who turn the other cheek
    For love of you, and pray.

       ...........................................

Our Father, God; our Brother, Christ,
    Or are we bastard kin,
That to our plaints your ears are closed,
    Your doors barred from within?47
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He prays for those who turn the other cheek to abuse from whites and maintain their faith in God. This religious image of the humble, turning the cheek, appears quite often in Cullen's verse. He wonders if God rejects the black man as whites do. His anxiety over the black man's adversity

overrides his sensibility at one point and he blasphemies God:

God is a toy, put Him away.  
Or make you one of wood or stone  
That you can call your very own  
A thing to feel and touch and stroke,  
Who does not break you with a yoke  
Of iron that he whispers soft;  
Nor promise you fine things aloft  
While back and belly here go bare,  
While His own image walks so spare  
And finds this life so hard to live  
You doubt that he has aught to give.  
Better an idol shaped of clay  
Near you, than one so far away.

Better my God should be  
This moving breathing frame of me,  
Strong hands and feet, live heart,  
and eyes;  
And when these cease, say then God dies.  
Your God is somewhere worlds away  
Hunting a star He shot astray.  

These verses are replete with images. God is comparable to a toy which should be discarded. The poet dismisses the image of the God of love and warmth by suggesting that one would do just as well to make a wooden or stone god. He admonishes the Christian God for promising things which He fails to deliver; he accuses God of lying. He, here, feels it is better that man fashion himself an idol god of clay. Moreover, man should make the individual self his god, and thus provide for himself because the Christian God does not have time for the black man. He discredits the image of God as infallible by the assertion of His hunting a star He shot astray. He further attacks the image of God as man's benefactor by making a comparison between Him and legendary Greek gods:

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When Rome was a suckling, When
Greece was young,
Then there were Gods to be sung,
Who paid the loyal devotee
For service rendered zealously,
In coin a man might feel and spend,
Not marked Deferred to Journey's End... .
Gods then were a thing to admire.49

Greek gods are applauded for having given their followers immediate rewards of monetary value in contrast to the promise of salvation made by God to man.

During a period of deliberation and distress, Cullen expresses a desire for a God in his own image. He feels that he would find some degree of consolation if God were black, and he poignantly sketches a god of Negroid features:

Lord, I fashion dark gods, too
Daring even to give You
Dark despairing features where,
Crowned with dark rebellious hair,
Patience wavers just so much as
Mortal grief compels, while touches
Quick and hot, of anger, rise
To smitten cheek and weary eyes.
Lord, forgive me if my need
Sometimes shapes a human creed.50

Granted that Cullen's verse often reflects him questioning the ways of God and His existence, it also illuminates his deep acceptance and immersion in Christian dogma, as evidenced in his final creation of a "Black Christ." His affirmation is repeated in "The Shroud of Color" when he realizes that withstanding the difficulties which the black man faces takes more courage than angels have. He makes a correlation between the trials of blacks and those of Christ. With this in mind, he finds con-

49 Ibid., p. 117.
solution in being black and also accepts God as the Supreme Being.

When the pipes of beauty play,
The feet must dance, the limbs must sway,
And even the heart with grief turned lead,
Beauty shall lift like a leaf wind-spied,
Shall swoop upon in gentle might,
Shall toss and lease and leave so light
That never again shall grief or care
Find long or willing lodgement there.
Tell them each law and rule they make
Mankind shall disregard and break
(If this must be) for beauty's sake.51

Out of the despairing and dreary images and aspects of life, Cullen was able to detect beauty. He found his most abundant images of beauty in nature. "Some definite images of beauty in nature are those of the silver snakes of Africa, of scattered dogwood petals in springtime, of a red and white star over a windy hill, and of the blue color of the Mediterranean Sea."52 Spring represents beauty at its peak—white apple blossoms, the smell of lilacs and clover, and the sound of birds chirping—for Cullen. He was able to sense beauty in the sound of rain falling on the leaves. Cullen was so impressed by colors, fragrances, and melodies that beauty appeared to "summon him."53 He became deranged by it.

"Cullen pays more than lip service to external beauty. (He felt that there was external and internal beauty in man). Beauty is in deed more than skin deep, for its concrete manifestation in dark women is associated with deep race pride and esoteric aesthetic standards."54 In his appraisal of beauty, he warns against the celebration of it as an end

51:"The Black Christ," On These I Stand, pp. 120-21.
53:"To John Keats, Poet, At Springtime," Caroling Dusk, p. 185.
in itself:

Beauty beats no frail wing;
Suffer men to gaze, poets to sing,

Bird of delight; a lovely face
Matched with an equal inner grace
Sweet bird, beware the Fowler, Pride.55

Another symbol of beauty for Cullen is Africa: its spicy groves, barbaric birds, jungles, exotic fruits, and throbbing drums. In his atavistic yearning for this setting, he represents "the American Negro, who hopelessly frustrated by the horrible ugliness of Jim Crow living, ... must create in his own mind a beautiful world—a dream world, if you will of past loveliness—to which he can turn for consolation and relief."56

Among the recurring themes in Cullen's verses, beauty is one which is significant because it is interlaced in some way in all of his themes. Although he was conscious of the pain and suffering of blacks, disillusioned by love, perplexed by the concept of death and that of religion, he was acutely aware of beauty in life.

55 "Advice to a Beauty," Copper Sun, p. 69.

CHAPTER IV

Countee Cullen and Images of Life

I have wrapped my dreams in a silken cloth,
And laid them away in a box of gold;
Where long will cling the lips of moth,
I have wrapped my dreams in a silken cloth;
I hide no hate; I am not even wroth
Who found earth's breath so keen and cold;
I have wrapped my dreams in a silken cloth.
And laid them in a box of gold.¹

Out of the Harlem Renaissance came one of America's most articulate carolers of verse, Countee Cullen. Writing during a period when Negro creativity and pride were at an apex, Cullen created some of the most poignant pictures of the black experience. His depiction of the very essence of blackness in America is analogous to a biography of the black culture, and it is for his artistry in capturing this experience in verse that he has been most applauded. However, Cullen's treatment of other themes equals and, in some instances, surpasses those of race. Particularly was he attracted and influenced by the conventions of romanticism and by other English forms. It is through his experimentation with such forms that Cullen mastered the poetic technique which has given him worldwide acclaim, lyricism. In this final chapter, I will present a summary and give a general interpretation of Cullen's poetics.

¹"For a Poet," Color, p. 45.

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Having become cognizant of his poetic capabilities early, Cullen decided that he wanted to be a poet. He considered a poet to be the greatest of all men. It was also at this point that he verbalized the basic premise of his aesthetics—the desire to be known as just "a poet" without any racial overtones. By living in America, Cullen felt that he should be able to write about any and all things which affected his thoughts, attitudes, and emotions as a man and as a poet. Being of a sensitive nature, Cullen was affected by all phases of life. He was angered and pleased by various concerns and felt compassion and empathy for mankind in general. In addition to being sensitive, he was also inquisitive. He wanted to know the why of things and conditions around him. He wanted to question and examine himself as an individual and the institutions of life, and such objectives could not be reached by restricting his writing to racial themes. He wanted to choose freely his themes and dress them in whatever colorful clothing he wished. Yet, it is ironic that Cullen was not able to fulfill this ambition completely. Instead, he found himself preoccupied with thoughts about the black situation in America, and these thoughts richly colored much of his writing.

At the beginning of his writing career, Cullen appeared to be optimistic about life, as expressed in "I Have a Rendezvous With Life." However, as he grew older and witnessed the sometimes sordid, unjust, and painful aspects of life (particularly with love and race), some of his optimism waned and this change in attitude was vividly reflected in his poetry. Nevertheless, Cullen was determined to find and cultivate the beauty that was in life. He sought to assuage the pain of life by looking for the harmonious as well as the more erratic aspects which serve to
culminate in giving life meaning. Poetry became the major source for this outlet:

There have been many things in my life that have hurt me, and I find the surest relief from these hurts is in writing.\(^2\)

Poetry enabled him to make "a beautiful thing of the wretchedness of existence."\(^3\)

In presenting his views and ideas through poetry, Cullen capitalized on imagery. Although the lyricism gives his verse some of its adornment, it is the imagery which gives it its greatest embellishment, vitality, and vividness. It is his imagery which not only enhances the poetry itself, but also gives further insight into the character of Cullen, the man, and magnifies his poetic achievement. In the case of Cullen, as any poet, the imagery reveals those things which most attracted, perplexed, or amused him about life and therefore shaped his attitudes.

For Cullen, life was the source of his imagery. He searched the everyday world, the intellectual realm, the celestial heavens, nature, the human anatomy and human nature, and religion, for images. From the earth, he found seeds to represent the germ of existence (birth, death, resurgence). Man is analogous to a seed which in growing blossoms into fruit, and in dying withers away to dry seed which begins the growth cycle again. Cullen found the rain to be a source of nourishment and stimulation and a kind of baptismal potion. Crowning the beauty of the world was the spring—new birth, innocence, purity, and hope in life. The heavens provided their share of brightness to his verses and the snake


\(^3\)Woodruff, "The Poetic Philosophy of Countee Cullen," p. 221.
and worm were the personifications of deception and the abominable, while Cullen found in birds the spirit of the free and cheerful man.

In addition, he found heart-rending images in human suffering. Wounds are as much a part of life as the beauty of the spring, thus the depiction of these only added to the kaleidoscopic image of life. Contrasting the images of pain are sources of sustenance and sweetness for life—bread and meat and wine, the essence of sweetness to Cullen.

From the everyday world of raiments, Cullen observed the beauty of fabrics and their tactile appeal. He explored the legends of Greek mythology and also analyzed the scriptures in search of images which would of themselves give illumination to his thoughts. Music parallels with spring as an image of inspiration for Cullen.

Through his use of a multiplicity of imagery sources, Cullen was able to stimulate the mind and senses of his readers. He aroused taste buds with his endowment of wine references, created colorful and striking pictures, recorded light and lamenting tunes, induced sensuous and stinging sensations, in addition to dispelling intoxicating and repugnant scents.

The forementioned sources and sense appeals all contribute to an understanding of the imagery in Countee Cullen's poetry. However, it is the thematic patterns of imagery which make even more explicit and serve as a culminating view of the skill of the poet in using imagery. In his recurring themes of race consciousness, love, death, religion, and beauty, Cullen elaborates on some of the specific concerns of all men. He questions the black man's place in the world. He speaks of the Negro as planter, dirt, and in a heightened analogy deems him black Christ. He
mocks his darkness in some instances and proudly speaks of regal blackness on other occasions. In all instances, one sees Cullen struggling to establish a balance between the positive and negative associations of "color-edness" in a world which favors whiteness, and in attempting to describe the particulars of each, he extracts his images from both the lowest and highest realms of being. Analysis of his treatment of other themes tends to reveal this same pattern of duality. It is seen in his love themes in which he at times appears only to lament the loss of love; however, further reading reveals the "carpe diem" attitude about love, and even in some of the most woeful themes, he seldom fails to point out some positive factor or dimension of love. Again, he fluctuates in his choice of images. Love is a book, flower, dream, malady; it is brackish, rotten, and even divine. One sees Cullen making a dogged attempt to explore every facet of love.

Death was perhaps the only theme in which Cullen expressed a choice. In this theme, he feels that death is a constant lover, a friend, a reward, but most of all, it is a just phase of life and should therefore not be feared. Whether this is due to his religious faith is difficult to say because his religious themes express conflicting ideas and images. He was torn between religious doctrine and pagan ideas. At times, he appeared to lean more toward one than the other. He had been reared in a religious environment, yet he found it difficult to disregard his African heritage and its pagan influence. The perpetual suffering of blacks caused him to doubt the "goodness" of God. However, contrary to his assertion that religion had no greater influence on him and his writing than other aspects of his life, his poetry and imagery reveal him to be baptised in religious postulates and ritual. His pagan instinct just added
conflict to his life, as all are faced with at times, but he never completely lost faith in God.

The theme of beauty sheds additional light on Cullen and his poetic concept. He was keenly aware of beauty in concrete objects and in abstractions. He peered farther than the exterior image of man to find internal beauty also. In his examination of diverse themes, objects, and ideas, he sought to find a balance in their attributes. Therefore, in looking at the sources from which Cullen extracted images and the sense appeals evoked by the images, he is revealed as a poet of life. His verse, as James Weldon Johnson stated, virtually constitutes "a criticism of life." His poetry is a kaleidoscopic image of life recorded in verse. He chose images from all areas of life to vividly depict the colorful and gloomy characteristics which underline and constitute life. It was his ability to sheathe his dreams and ideas about life in silken images without distorting their true properties and thereby to stimulate sometimes the emotion of his readers to points of catharsis that won Cullen acclaim as poet, and established the canon of his poetry as a portrait of life.

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