Meet Countee Cullen



Countee Cullen's life was marked by contradictions. As a writer, he was known for speaking out against poetry that was "racial," yet he wrote forcefully about racial injustice. A twentieth-century American, he turned to highly structured and traditional verse forms from the European past. Although Cullen's early work won much praise, he received little recognition after he reached his thirties.

Cullen grew up and went to school in New York City. While a graduate student at Harvard University, he studied and admired traditional European poetic forms. He modeled his poetry after the work of John Keats, an English Romantic poet. Still, James Weldon Johnson noted that "the best of his poetry is motivated by race." Before Cullen had finished college, his first book of poems, *Color,* was published and received critical acclaim.

Cullen published several collections of poetry after *Color,* but his literary reputation declined gradually. In his thirties he began teaching junior high school in New York City, a job that he held until his death.

"I find that I am actuated by a strong sense of race consciousness."

—*Cullen*

Countee Cullen was born in 1903 and died in 1946.