

## Faith as the Hue of Resilience in Countee Cullen's *Color*

Youssef Oubihi <sup>1</sup>

---

### Abstract

*The Harlem Renaissance, also known as the renaissance of African American literature, is a remarkable and pivotal point in the teeming history of literature. During this period, which is marked by both aggressive and peaceful responses against segregation and racism, faith played a significant role in the lives of African Americans, which was reflected in their artistic expressions. Through one of Harlem's distinguished poets, Countee Cullen, and his seminal collection of poems, *Color*, this paper aims to explore the effect of faith, religion, and spirituality on forming and shaping resilience and relieving the pain endured by people of colour in the United States of America. Using the lenses of the psychoanalytic approach, this paper endeavours to deconstruct the poet's psyche through his writings to reveal how and why his soul, under the pressure of discrimination, flees to religion as a befitting resort. Cullen's rhymes and rhythms, which exhibit shades of his identity and experiences, echo his entire race's heritage. Thus, understanding the biblical allusions in his poems opens the beholder's eyes to one of the essential pillars of African American literature.*

**Keywords:** Faith, Resilience, Harlem, Color, Poetry, Countee Cullen, African American

---

<sup>1</sup> Department of English Studies, Sultan Moulay Slimane University, Morocco.

Email: [youssefoubihi10@gmail.com](mailto:youssefoubihi10@gmail.com)

#### Publication Details:

Article Received: September 10, 2024

Article Revised: January 05, 2025

Article Published: January 30, 2025

Recommended citation in APA 7<sup>th</sup>:

Oubihi, Y. (2025). "Faith as the Hue of Resilience in Countee Cullen's *Color*". *International Review of Literary Studies*, 7(1): pp. xx. <https://irlsjournal.com/index.php/Irls>

Published by Licensee MARS Publishers. Copyright: © the author(s). This article is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license. (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

## Introduction

“Faith is the bird that feels the light  
And sings when the dawn is still dark.”

Rabindranath Tagore<sup>1</sup>

Faith, which is profoundly associated with hope and its intangible powers, is well known for its firmly entrenched and deep roots in religion. There is no religion without faith, just as there is no faith without acceptance (Pargament & Exline, 2021). Acceptance *per se* often emerges from being in a helpless situation and the inability to change the circumstances or fate that befall one. Faith has more than one form. Jones differentiates between spiritual faith and religious faith. Spiritual faith is more about internal experiences, meaning it is a personal and inward expression, whereas religious faith involves a relation not only with the divine but with other people through common practices, meaning it is a social and external expression (Jones, 2018). This paper focuses more on the poet's inner experience and his clinging to the rope of faith. Overall, faith is a form of spiritual need for a human being that provides a sense of purpose, connection, and hope (Paul Victor, 2020).

Countee Cullen, a prominent Harlem Renaissance figure, draws on religion in composing his poems, carving his name in history's book among the pillars of African American writers. Harlem, New York City's neighborhood, marks an unrepeatable era during the 1920s when Black American voices rose, unveiling their capacity and creativity that matched those of the whites in value but differed in style and voice (Mitchell II, 2010). This artistic movement resembles a silenced bird that regains its voice and starts chirping with an unmatched tone. The self-consciousness of their identity as African Americans, with the long heritage of their ancestors, finds its way through art that manifests and exhibits their existence, fortitude, and resilience.

This artistic movement, in essence, is a reaction against the everlasting history of slavery, racism, discrimination, and the inequitable treatment people of color have faced solely due to the varying hues of their skin (Chapman, 1967). Between aggressive and peaceful responses against all that, faith plays a significant role. Undoubtedly, there is room for debate in Color over the effect of faith and religion in shaping Black people's resilience. I opt for these three poems to be analyzed and examined, as I believe they are sufficient to make the point clear: “Yet Do I Marvel,” “Simon the Cyrenian Speaks,” and “Heritage.”

Countee Cullen's collection consists of 72 poems, divided into four categories: Color, Epitaphs, For Love's Sake, and Varia. The poems differ from one another in terms of form, rhyme, and rhythm; most of them are short, and a few are long; most of the stanzas are quatrains; some are

---

<sup>1</sup> These very lines are quoted from Rabindranath Tagore's book *Fireflies* (1928).

sestets and octaves; a few are sonnets; others follow neither this nor that. The variation extends to encompass the rhyme scheme and rhythm employed in each poem. However, each group flows into the same river and shares the same hue of the theme's color.

The first category, Color, contains 23 poems in which the poet praises Black beauty and denounces segregation, discrimination, and racism. The section is concerned entirely with race consciousness. The poet first uses Black features to celebrate his race's beauty and resist any kind of racism by fully believing in God and following Christian tenets and values. Under the title of Epithaphs, the reader encounters poems in the form of one-quatrain stanzas (except two), in which each poem is devoted to a particular person, like the text inscribed on a tombstone. This group's poems' slogan can be as follows: 'Death marks the end of everything, including suffering and resilience as well.' For the Love's Sake section, the 8 poems are centered on the theme of love, where the poet expresses, using beautiful figurative language, the noblest emotion in human beings. The poems are not devoted to a particular person (a lover) but to the readers who are in love or have experienced it before. Varia, as the title might suggest, is a group of different poems that vary from one another and could not be fitted into one of the previous categories yet are suitable for the whole collection. These poems touch on different themes, using various forms and techniques.

Although the poems are different, the ghosts of biblical allusions circulate from one group to another, from poem to poem, and from line to line. Perhaps "Yet Do I Marvel," "Simon the Cyrenian Speaks," and "Heritage" from the first group, Color, are the best instances to examine to answer the paper's questions.

### **Faith as a source of resilience:**

#### **a) Yet Do I Marvel**

When I first read the first poem of the collection and perhaps the most famous poem written by Countee Cullen, "Yet Do I Marvel," I immediately remembered these lines by Alexander Pope:

"Know then thyself, presume not God to scan;  
The proper study of mankind is man."

In these lines, Pope emphasizes the importance of studying the self instead of trying to understand the divine, for it is out of reach for finite creatures like humans to come close to fathoming God's ways. Similarly, but not quite exactly the same, Cullen in the first line of his sonnet, which reads thusly, "I Doubt not God is good, well-meaning, kind" (Cullen, 1925, p. 3), expresses his absolute belief, not only in God but in the goodness of the divine. Cullen continues the octet to support his first argument by using the beautiful imagery of a mole who lives digging blindly underground

burrows, unable to see but always finding its way. In the second part of the octave, the poet employs instances from Greek mythology, namely Tantalus and Sisyphus, emphasizing the idea that any torture, pain, or agony one suffers from in life is due to a previous mistake or sin and not to the cruelty of God (Bunker, 1953). In short, you get punished based on your own actions and decisions. God should not be questioned; there is always a reason behind anything that befalls anyone. As for the sestet, the first two lines resonate perfectly with Pope's lines and explain them:

“Inscrutable His ways are, and immune  
To catechism by a mind too strewn ”(p.3)

Cullen stresses the mysterious ways in which God works and sheds light on the human brain's inability to ultimately understand divine actions. Humans' reason can by no means reach a level that will allow them to comprehend how the threads of fate are woven. However, the poet's attempt to avoid questioning anything related to God ultimately fails in the final two lines:

“Yet do I marvel at this curious thing:  
To make a poet black, and bid him sing! ”(p.3)

Even for believers, particularly people of color, it is still mysterious what wisdom lies behind making some people's skin black and what fortune is waiting for them after enduring racism, segregation, and mistreatment of their race. In essence, religion bestows comfort and offers hope against the inevitable blows of life. Faith can provide a sense of purpose to keep going when all seems lost. Because of the pressure of inequality, the poet's blood boils with anger and rage, but faith interferes to cool this natural human response and flee to literature by arranging rhymes in lines and giving voice to his thoughts through words.

Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, argues that “God was the exalted father, and the longing for the father was the root of the need for religion.” (Freud, 1975). In other words, God is an infantile fantasy based on the need for a dominant father figure. The traditional view of fatherhood can be summarized as the protector, the one who shields the family from danger. In this way, due to the oppression the poet is afflicted with and the insecurity he and his race have faced in their lives, he resorts to his father figure, God. Through religion and faith, the hurt child reconnects with the one who can provide a sense of security and heal the injured. Thus, resilience is achieved through a blind belief in the protective father's interference in solving the crises his children encounter.

### **b) Simon the Cyrenian Speaks**

“Simon the Cyrenian Speaks” consists of four quatrains, each stanza following a rhyme scheme of ABAB. The short poem does not follow a strict meter, yet the first and third lines of each stanza

consist of four feet, forming a tetrameter, while the second and fourth lines are made of three feet, making a trimeter. The poem is narrated from Simon's first-person point of view. The latter is a biblical character whom the Romans compelled to bear the cross of Jesus.

In the poem, Simon embodies the poet himself, and the cross the former bears on his back symbolizes the pain of discrimination and racism endured by the latter because of the color of his skin. As the second stanza goes:

“At first I said, "I will not bear  
His cross upon my back;  
He only seeks to place it there  
Because my skin is black." ” (p. 14)

Cullen's quatrain engages with the tension between righteous irritation and the solace of faith. He opens the stanza with “At first,” then, in the following lines, denounces the heavy burden God bound him with. In other words, he initially reacts with outrage, protesting and dissenting against the deplorable situation, rather than accepting it with subservience and submission. However, in the following stanza, faith intervenes to lubricate and cool the poet's rage and anger, opening a new way for another interpretation: “But he was dying for a dream” and continuing to explain that there are some mysterious and hidden reasons behind the cross in his back. Using the lantern of true belief, one who takes the journey into the utter darkness of the forest of life may never get lost and always find the light of resilience and fortitude.

In the last stanza:

“It was Himself my pity bought;  
I did for Christ alone  
What all of Rome could not have wrought  
With bruise of lash or stone. ” (p. 14)

Here, Cullen displays not only his inner struggle but also his entire race's frustration and exasperation towards God because of the unjust treatment they receive as a reward for their unwavering faith and honest devotion to religion. Freud posits that “if one had done so much for one's father, one wanted to have a reward, or at least to be his only beloved child, his Chosen People.” (Freud, 1975, p. 22) Thus, people of color who cling to the tenets and values of Christianity, which are God's instructions, orders, and commands, must receive at least a recompense or a reward, such as equality. After all that endurance and bearing the burden of being Black, the poet expects to be considered the ‘beloved child,’ and his people, the ‘Chosen People.’ Since his faith burns bright, he does not blame the divine.

He is deeply imbued with the values of Christianity that bloom out of the seeds of peace and tolerance, guiding the poet and allowing him to react peacefully to what he encounters in life's misfortunes, knowing that in the afterlife he will surely be rewarded by the blissful, serene, and euphoric eternal life he deserves.

In another poem, titled "Fruit of the Flower," Cullen reveals that his personality is shaped by a combination of his mother's way of life and his father's. While he describes his mother as purely religious, he refers to his father as a not-so-deeply religious believer. As his poems show, Cullen tends to swim in his mother's river. Psychoanalysts, namely Freud, can by no means overlook this. Through the Oedipus complex, he argues that children view their same-sex parent as a rival and an opponent in their battle to be rewarded by possessing the opposite-sex parent; thus, they enter this imaginative competition to gain the latter's attention and affection (Freud, 1931). Likewise, in order to gain his mother's tenderness, the poet adopts her belief, which is something that his father is unable to do. This way, he secures his victory in the battle against his same-sex parent. Therefore, the poet draws unconsciously on religion and clings to faith to satisfy his desire for a mother and to end the sense of longing.

### c) Heritage

Seven stanzas of varying length make up Cullen's "Heritage" poem. The poem delves into the poet's complex relationship with his African heritage and African American identity. It describes the speaker's sense of disconnection from his past, a past of slavery, racism, and struggle. Through the poem, Cullen seeks to fathom how his ancestors' heritage and Christendom coexist within him, aspiring to achieve a harmonious balance. Faith, again, plays a crucial role, taking the speaker's hand as he endures his internal conflict and external pressures that frame his African American identity. The poem commences with the first stanza, where the speaker expresses what Africa is to him, then asks the pivotal question of the whole poem:

"One three centuries removed  
From the scenes his fathers loved,  
Spicy grove, cinnamon tree,  
What is Africa to me?"(Cullen, 1925, p. 36)

Here, Cullen manifests the long distance of "three centuries" between him and Africa, which his fathers knew and adored. This period, where the poet lives, witnesses horrible treatment against his race; it is a period of enslavement and forced migration to America and other parts of the world, searching for a peaceful and endurable place to live. During this time, Africans suffer from a rupture

in their identity and the loss of a direct connection to their cultural roots, languages, and traditions. Accordingly, the poet questions what Africa means to him since he is totally removed from his African ancestors' natural and direct experience and memories.

Cullen ends his poem with these provocative lines:

“Melting like the merest wax,  
Lest the grave restore its dead.  
Not yet has my heart or head  
In the least way realized  
They and I are civilized.” (p. 41)

The imagery in the first line suggests fragility and hopelessness, as the speaker feels that his identity easily melts like wax under the heat of oppression and disconnection from his deep African roots. In the last three lines, Cullen reflects on the struggle his emotions “heart” and his intellect “head” go through in the shade of unacceptance and unrecognition of his African American identity in a society that often dehumanizes and marginalizes them.

Between the dilemmas of the past and the present, faith intervenes and bestows the poet with a sense of stability and belonging. Faith enables the poet to plant his lost feet in a world that feels culturally and racially divided. In the heart of his poem, Cullen states, “Lord, I fashion dark gods, too.” “Daring even to give You,” “Dark despairing features” (p. 40)—these lines highlight the poet's yearning for a Black God that can represent African or African American deities or spiritual entities. With a God that resembles the poet's appearance features, He will also resemble him in sensing the pain endured by His creatures, and surely His teachings will change, befitting His new identity, from ‘turning the other cheek’ to rising and reacting. However, Cullen returns to the appeal, “Lord, forgive me if my need.” “Sometimes shapes a human creed.” (p. 40) Seeking forgiveness from God for the ways in which his own needs may color his ongoing search for spiritual meaning, reflecting the strong faith he has in Christianity that even the rage and anger derived from his heritage could not separate him from his belief in religion, and calming his inner effervescence, he achieves true resilience.

In her book, *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense*, Anna Freud, following her father's steps, crafts a more detailed version and more explicit text about the Freudian defense mechanisms. These mechanisms of defense are employed in several works of Freud “to describe the ego's struggle against painful or unendurable ideas or affects.” (Freud, 1983, p. 42) Even though Anna Freud herself declares that “It will probably be best to abandon the attempt so to classify them and, instead, to study in detail the situations which call for the defensive reactions” (p. 53), it is possible to categorize them



for the sake of the analysis into three major categories: immature, neurotic, and mature defense mechanisms.

All primitive and irrational responses, such as denial, fall under the immature defense category, which is considered a lower adaptive mode of response. This mechanism, denial, is defined by Freud's daughter as a resort where "the infantile ego" flees "in order not to become aware of some painful impression from without." (p. 89) This refusal to accept harsh reality or hurtful facts is perhaps best shown when Cullen denies the full impact of his heritage on his current identity. The poet's repeated refrain, "What is Africa to me?" underlines a profound sense of disconnection. Each question acts like another brick in a wall, further separating him from his African heritage and history. By calling Africa "Last year," he completely denies the lasting, profound influence his ancestry has on him.

According to Anna Freud, neurotic defense mechanisms such as regression "are probably independent of the stage which the psychic structure has reached and as old as the instincts themselves, or at least as old as the conflict between instinctual impulses and any hindrance which they may encounter on their way to gratification." This mechanism refers to the ego's escape to an earlier stage of development in response to anxiety and stress. It is best shown in the poem when the poet yearns and longs for a perfect and idealized past when his race is deeply connected with Africa, which his "fathers loved." The imagery of the next line mentioned earlier, "Spice Grove, Cinnamon Tree," serves as clear-cut evidence of the poet's romanticized and idealized view of Africa and his past.

The mature defensive category is considered a high-adaptive defense level, consisting of different modes of healthy conscious responses, such as sublimation. Sublimation, according to Anna Freud, is when "the ego achieves its purpose of diverting the instinctual impulses [...] to aims which society holds to be higher." (p. 175) Writing "Heritage" itself can be considered an act of sublimation, where Cullen transports his inner conflicted feelings about his African heritage into rhymes and rhythms, thus converting them into a form of artistic expression. Thus, his woes' endurance becomes attainable and artistically blooms.

I can include 'faith' as an additional defense mechanism with which the poet evades the unstoppable avalanche of racism and discrimination. Religion often imposed itself in Cullen's writings. This aligns with Desmond Tutu's words: "When the missionaries came to Africa, they had the Bible, and we had the land. They said, 'Let us pray.' We closed our eyes. When we opened them, we had the Bible, and they had the land." The white man indeed used religion as a means of manipulation to seize African land, save that by appropriating religion and truly and faithfully following Christianity tenets and values, faith transforms into a mechanism of defense with which



the segregated not only defend but also resist, allowing a tangible and intangible space for resilience and fortitude.

## Conclusion

Countee Cullen's *Color* unfolds with layers of complexity, mirroring the psychological labyrinth of the poet's mind. As he uses poetry as an artistic expression to express his struggles and difficulties with his identity, faith also finds its way through each rhyme and rhythm, coloring his woes with hues of resilience. Faith under examination through the lenses of the psychoanalytic approach proves to be a suitable and comfortable resort for the poet's mind to flee to, both consciously and unconsciously. Freud's legacy carries valuable keys, enabling the reader to unlock the unconscious part of the author's mind to understand better the form, tone, and words the latter employs in his art piece. The Oedipus complex, God as a father figure, and all psychological defense mechanisms play a crucial role in shaping the poet's resilience through faith. However, this paper, like any other paper, has some limitations, and perhaps the most significant one is the small number of poems I have worked on. The poems are "Yet Do I Marvel," "Simon the Cyrenian Speaks," and "Heritage." Many other poems from Cullen's collection need to be analyzed under the same topic, and many others need to be explored with different problematics and perspectives. As this paper commences with a poem by Rabindranath Tagore, it is fitting to terminate with another of his works. The following lines are from his well-known poem "Leave This": "Leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads! Whom dost thou worship in this lonely dark corner of a temple with doors all shut?"

## References

- Chapman, A. (1967). The Harlem Renaissance in literary history. *CLA Journal*, 11(1), 38–58.
- Cullen, C. (1925). *Color*. Harper & Brothers.
- Freud, A. (1983). *The ego and the mechanisms of defense* (Rev. ed., Vol. 2). (C. Baines, Trans.). International Universities Press, Inc.
- Freud, S. (1931). *The interpretation of dreams* (A. A. Brill, Trans.). Allen & Unwin.
- Freud, S. (1975). *The future of an illusion* (J. Strachey, Trans. & Ed.). W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.
- Henry, A. B. (1953). Tantalus: A Preœdipal Figure of Myth, *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, 22:2, 159-173

- Jones, K. F. (2018). Spirituality: More than just religion. *Journal of the Australasian Rehabilitation Nurses' Association*, 21(2), 12-14.
- Mitchell II, E. J. (2010). "Black Renaissance": A brief history of the concept. *Amerikastudien / American Studies*, 55(4), 641-665.
- Paul Victor, C. G., & Treschuk, J. V. (2020). Critical literature review on the definition clarity of the concept of faith, religion, and spirituality. *Journal of Holistic Nursing*, 38(1), 107-113.
- Pargament, K. I., & Exline, J. J. (2021). *Working with spiritual struggles in psychotherapy: From research to practice*. Guilford Publications.
- Pope, A. (1988). *Alexander Pope: Selected poetry and prose* (R. Sowerby, Ed.). Routledge.
- Tagore, R. (1913). Leave this. In *Gitanjali*. The Macmillan Company.
- Tagore, R. (1928). *Fireflies*. The Macmillan Company.