Incident

POEM TEXT

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

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

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

SUMMARY

One time, while riding around old Baltimore, my heart and head overflowing with happiness, I noticed that there was someone from the city who kept staring right at me.

See, I was only eight years old and quite little, and this other kid wasn't much larger than I was, so I smiled at him—but he stuck his tongue out at me and called me the n-word.

I got to see all of Baltimore over the rest of that year, but whatever else might have happened while I was in the city, that moment is the only thing that stuck with me.

THEMES

RACISM AND LOST INNOCENCE

The poem's speaker recalls an "incident" from a childhood trip to Baltimore in which another little boy calls him the n-word. This early brush with the reality of racism overshadows the rest of the speaker's trip and remains vivid in his memory for years to come. In showing how this moment shatters the speaker's joyful innocence and reshapes his experience of the world, the poem illustrates the lasting pain and trauma of coming face to face with racism as a child.

Before this "incident," the speaker's head and heart are "filled with glee." He's excited and overjoyed to be "riding in old Baltimore"—a trip the poem suggests is the speaker's first away from home and, it follows, away from a certain level of protection from the racism of the outside world.

There's no mention of race at all until the poem's eighth line, in fact, suggesting how little importance the speaker grants it as a child. All he cares about upon seeing another little boy is the fact that this other child isn't any "bigger" than the speaker and is from the city (making him an exotic "Baltimorean"). The happy speaker never mentions this boy's race, and sees no reason not to extend a friendly gesture despite the fact that, as readers will soon learn, this other child isn't Black.

In response, this other child sticks out his tongue and calls the speaker a terrible racial slur. Though the speaker never says exactly how he feels right then, the fact that he remembers nothing else of the trip apart from this "incident" speaks volumes. It's clear that this slur crushes the speaker's previously wondrous spirit by alerting him to the reality of prejudice. And even though he sees "the whole of Baltimore" during this trip, the racist "incident" is the *only* thing he remembers of it. Confronting the jarring reality of racism upends the speaker's entire world, as the speaker realizes that the place he was so excited to explore is filled with baseless hatred towards him.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

Once riding in old Baltimore,
Heart-filled, head-filled with glee,

The poem begins with the speaker "riding through old Baltimore." The phrase "old Baltimore" has a couple of possible interpretations:

- On the one hand, "old" sometimes suggests a sense of familiarity and affection (as in "good old such-and-such"). In this way, the speaker is perhaps expressing that he feels comfortable and happy in Baltimore.
- "Old Baltimore" is also another name for the western part of the city, a part that, due to intense segregation, housed a large percentage of Baltimore's Black population in Cullen's time.

As he's riding through this part of town on a streetcar, the speaker describes himself as being "Heart-filled, head-filled

with glee." In other words, his head and heart are overflowing with happiness. He's having the time of his life, excited to be taking this trip through the city.

The parallelism and alliteration of "Heart-filled, head-filled" evokes the intensity of the speaker's joy and suggests that he's not just emotionally happy, but also deeply curious (his "head" is also filled with "glee"). All this excitement and wonder implies that this trip is the speaker's first through this part of Baltimore, and maybe even his first trip away from home.

The speaker isn't just *saying* he was happy, either; readers can *feel* it in the buoyancy of the poem's rhythm. "Incident" features something called ballad meter, meaning its lines alternate between iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter. An iamb is a poetic foot with an unstressed-stressed syllable pattern; tetrameter means there are four of these iambs per line, while trimeter means there are just three.

> Once ri- | ding in | old Balt- | imore,
> Heart-filled, | head-filled | with glee,

As readers can see, of course, the meter isn't totally steady here. The speaker opens line 2 with a pair of spondees (feet with a stressed-stressed pattern), and some readers might actually scan the first foot of line one as a spondee as well ("Once ri-"). All these extra stresses emphasize the speaker's intense joy and excitement, which can't be contained by the poem's form.

LINES 3-4

I saw a Baltimorean
Keep looking straight at me.

The speaker notices that a "Baltimorean" is looking at him. The fact that the speaker refers to this person as a "Baltimorean" indicates that the speaker himself is *not* from Baltimore and is only visiting. This is a new and exciting adventure for the speaker, and seeing a real, live "Baltimorean"—someone who actually lives in the city—is almost like spotting an exotic animal.

Already, however, there's a hint that something's amiss: the Baltimorean "Keep[s] looking straight at" the speaker. The phrase "looking straight at" feels pointed and even slightly hostile. Though the speaker is blissfully unaware at this point as to why this "Baltimorean" keeps staring at him, readers might already start to realize that the speaker sticks out in this crowd, and that this "Baltimorean" is looking on with a bit of judgment. That this person "keep[s]" looking at the speaker suggests that the stare goes on for longer than would be considered polite.

Still, the poem's sounds remain bouncy and happy in these lines. Note the /aw/ assonance of "saw a Baltimorean," for example, which adds to the musicality of the speaker's language. The speaker, for now, doesn't realize that something bad is about to happen.

LINES 5-8

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

Readers learn that the speaker is only eight years old, and that the person staring at him is "no whit bigger." In other words, this "Baltimorean" is in fact another child, around the same age and size as the speaker himself. The speaker sees this as reason enough to smile at the Baltimorean; why shouldn't two kids on the same streetcar be friendly?

Notably, the speaker doesn't mention the other little boy's race at all when describing him, which suggests that it doesn't really matter, or perhaps even register, to the speaker that this other child isn't Black. This, in turn, reveals the speaker's innocence; he's not yet aware of, or doesn't fully understand, the existence of prejudice, and thus doesn't think it's a big deal to simply smile at a white child. This *was* a big deal in Cullen's time, however, when the country remained intensely racist and even just looking the wrong way at a white person could spell horrible violence or even death for a Black person.

The speaker's innocence gets shattered soon enough, however, when the other boy shuts down his sweet attempt at friendliness by sticking out his tongue and calling the speaker the n-word. This response is wildly ignorant and unnecessarily cruel, and it brings the poem's joyful tone to a screeching halt. The full stop and stanza break following the use of this slur captures the speaker's shock and horror.

LINES 9-12

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

After the shock of the second stanza, the poem returns to a kind of normalcy: the speaker goes on to say that he spent the entire rest of the year traveling around the city. This sudden time jump makes it seem at first as though the speaker has forgotten the incident, or at least moved on from it.

The poem maintains its sense of lightheartedness with its continued use of ballad meter. Take line 9:

> I saw | the whole | of Balt- | imore

The perfect iambic stress pattern (unstressed-stressed) suggests that nothing has changed; everything is still neatly in its place. Consonance and assonance continue to give the poem a pleasant cadence that is at odds with what the speaker just experienced as well, with repeated /m/ and /aw/ sounds adding to the lines' musicality:

I saw the whole of Baltimore
From May until December;

As readers will soon see, however, these lines are a set-up, a kind of bait and switch: the speaker is emphasizing how long he spent in the city and how much he saw there in order to hammer home just how strongly this "incident" affected him. Despite spending eight months in the city, the incident will be the only thing that sticks out in his mind. "Of all the things that happened" while he was in Baltimore, he can only "remember" this one moment on the train.

The joy and wonder the speaker felt at the poem's start has disappeared by the poem's end, replaced with a terrible new awareness of racist hatred. Such racism has stolen the speaker's innocence and overshadowed any other joys he went on to experience in Baltimore. All the specificity from earlier in the poem has drained away, even as the racism the speaker experienced sticks out so clearly in his mind.

SYMBOLS

THE BALTIMOREAN

The Baltimorean represents racist society in general. Though the speaker is describing a very specific moment here, the whole "incident" can be thought of as the speaker's painful introduction to the harsh reality of racial prejudice. The speaker's confrontation with this one racist child shakes him to his core, and that's *because* the Baltimorean represents so much more than just one racist child. In confronting the Baltimorean, the speaker is also confronting the knowledge that part of society hates him simply because of the color of his skin.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "I saw a Baltimorean / Keep looking straight at me."

POETIC DEVICES

CONSONANCE

"Incident" features clear, straightforward language that feels intimate and conversational. As such, it doesn't use many poetic devices that draw attention to themselves, as consonance, alliteration, and assonance do. That said, there are moments of each sonic device in the poem that add to its bouncy rhythm. Combined with the poem's steady meter and rhyme scheme, these devices create pleasant music in the poem that's at odds with what actually happens.

Let's focus on the poem's use of consonance, the broadest of these three sonic devices, first. In the first stanza, repetition of /d/, /l/, /h/, and /k/ sounds reflects the speaker's joy and wonder as he rides through Baltimore. The consonance is pretty subtle, but it still adds a gentle musicality to these lines that evokes the speaker's happiness:

Once riding in old Baltimore,
Heart-filled, head-filled with glee,
I saw a Baltimorean
Keep looking [...]

In the second stanza, there is significantly less going on in terms of consonance until lines 7-8. These then feature a mixture of hissing /s/ and sharp /k/ and /t/ sounds that add harshness to the "incident" of the poem's title:

[...] he poked out
His tongue, and called [...]

The spiky sounds here evoke the shock and horror of the little boy's actions and make them stand out all the more starkly in the poem.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "riding," "old," "Baltimore"
- **Line 2:** "Heart," "filled," "head," "filled," "glee"
- **Line 3:** "Baltimorean"
- **Line 4:** "Keep," "looking"
- **Line 7:** "so," "smiled," "poked," "out"
- **Line 8:** "tongue," "called"
- **Line 9:** "Baltimore"
- **Line 10:** "From," "May," "December"

ALLITERATION

There are only a few moments of true alliteration in the poem, which otherwise keeps the language simple and conversational. The most striking moment of distinctly *poetic* language comes in line 2, which describes the speaker's state of mind upon beginning his trip around Baltimore:

Heart-filled, head-filled with glee.

On one level, the alliteration of "heart" and "head" here simply draws readers attention to this phrase. Alliteration also makes the language feel more elaborate and wondrous in this moment, and thus reveals to readers how the speaker's innocent joy seems to shape the world around him.

The other moments of alliteration—"was"/"whit" and "so"/"smiled" in the second stanza—again create a sense of playfulness, which then gets sharply undermined by the "incident" if the poem's title.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Heart," "head"
- **Line 6:** "was," "whit"
- **Line 7:** "so," "smiled"

ASSONANCE

In addition to consonance and alliteration, the poem uses assonance to create musicality. The clearest example of assonance comes in line 3, with "saw a Baltimorean." The music and levity of the language here makes this "Baltimorean" seem like a fun curiosity rather than someone threatening. The speaker's language in this moment thus reflects his innocent mindset.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "saw," "Baltimorean"

ENJAMBMENT

The majority of the poem's lines end-stopped, creating a steady, even pace throughout. The many end-stopped lines suggest the control the speaker has over the way he's retelling this story from his childhood. This isn't someone who is just rambling and happens to remember something he'd otherwise forgotten; there is a clear sense of purpose and direction to this poem, reflected by all those end-stops.

However, the third line of every stanza is enjambed, as in line 3:

> I saw a Baltimorean
> Keep looking [...]

This, too, is part of the poem's pacing. That enjambment right before the end of each stanza speeds the poem up for a beat and, in turn, makes the next and final end-stopped line of each stanza land all the more forcefully. This is especially clear with the second stanza, where the speaker's description of the little boy builds in intensity and excitement. The enjambment after "out" in line 7 creates a sense of anticipation that pushes readers right on into the next line, only to then get smacked with that terrible slur that brings the poem to a halt. The balance between enjambed and end-stopped lines is a huge part of what allows the poem to deliver the sense of shock the speaker himself experienced.

The first and third stanzas feature a similar build up of anticipation in their third lines, only to be brought back down to earth by their final end-stops.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "Baltimorean / Keep"
- **Lines 7-8:** "out / His"
- **Lines 9-10:** "Baltimore / From"
- **Lines 11-12:** "there / That's"

JUXTAPOSITION

The poem is built on juxtaposition, as the speaker's playful tone and the poem's bouncy rhythms seem at odds with its weighty subject. The speaker also juxtaposes his joy upon visiting Baltimore with the shock of being called a racial slur and with his later somber recollection of this "incident."

The first thing the reader sees is the speaker, an eight-year-old child, riding through the streets of Baltimore, "filled with glee." The speaker's profound happiness fills the poem here. Such joy and excitement comes crashing down to earth in the second stanza, however, when another little boy hurls a racial slur at the speaker.

The speaker also contrasts the "Baltimorean's" nonthreatening appearance—he's "no whit bigger" than the speaker himself—with his ability to deeply wound the speaker through racist language. Poking out one's tongue might at first seem like an ordinary act of childlike mischievousness, but the use of a racial slur quickly reveals the little boy's cruelty and ignorance. This juxtaposition, in turn, highlights the vastly uneven power dynamic between the Baltimorean and the speaker in a racist society.

Finally, the poem's third stanza takes on a more somber tone than its first two, and its vague language contrasts with the poem's initial vivid images. Where the speaker describes the "incident" itself in clear detail, the rest of the trip remains a blur in the speaker's mind, eight months boiling down to this single moment on the train. This shift in tone and specificity underscores the fact that the "incident" overshadowed everything else on the speaker's trip, and has remained lodged in his mind for many years.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12

VOCABULARY

Glee (Line 2) - Delight or happiness.

Baltimorean (Line 3) - A person who lives in Baltimore, Maryland.

whit (Line 6) - A very small amount.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Incident" is a 12-line poem divided into three quatrains, or four-line stanzas. It's also a ballad, and as such uses a very specific meter and rhyme scheme that provides a certain jaunty and rhythmic feel.

A ballad is an old form of English-language poetry often used to tell stories. And given that English-language poetry was traditionally dominated by white people, those stories weren't exactly diverse. In using the ballad form, then, Cullen is tapping into a longstanding literary legacy and making it his own, insisting that Black people's stories are just as worthy of commemoration in poetry as anyone else's.

METER

"Incident" is written in something called ballad meter, well known for its use in Christian church hymns. This means that the poem has alternating lines of iambic tetrameter (lines of four iambs, feet that follow an unstressed-stressed beat pattern) and iambic trimeter (lines of three iambs). For a perfect examples of this, take lines 3-4:

> I saw | a Bal- | timor- | ean
> Keep look- | ing straight | at me.

In using this meter, Cullen is again tapping into English poetic tradition. Iambic meter has a bouncy rhythm that mimics the way people actually speaker, and its use here (along with the poem's steady rhyme scheme) adds a strangely light-hearted feel to a poem whose subject is actually quite devastating. The disconnect between the poem's light and conversational rhythm and the speaker's heartbreak emphasizes the cruel nature of racism, which robs the speaker of the memory of an otherwise joyful day and leaves him instead with the vivid recollection of this "incident."

RHYME SCHEME

As is typical for ballads, each stanza in the poem follows the rhyme scheme:

> ABCB

The even-numbered lines rhyme, while the odd-numbered lines don't. The ballad's strict rhyme scheme adds to the poem's lighthearted, jaunty feel. The steady, clear end rhymes often make ballads feel a bit like a nursery rhyme or a church hymn. In this way, the poem's form butts up uncomfortably against its content. That is, the seriousness of the subject here might come as a surprise given the poem's lighthearted rhythm. Upon reaching the end of the second stanza, the reader might experience the speaker's shock and devastation of having something beautiful ruined by an act of bigotry.

SPEAKER

The speaker is a Black person looking back on a racist "incident" that happened in childhood, specifically when he was "eight and very small." (Note that the speaker is never gendered in the poem; we've used male pronouns throughout this given the speaker's resemblance to the poet, Countee Cullen. It's not necessary to read the speaker as male to understand the poem.)

The fact that the speaker seems to be much older in the actual telling of the poem speaks to just how much this event has stuck out his mind; years later, it's the only thing the speaker remembers from this nearly year-long trip to Baltimore.

There's a harsh line in the speaker's life before and after this moment: he can still remember how happy he was leading up to the incident, yet everything that comes after gets tainted by the little boy's slur. The event seemingly opened the speaker's eyes to the immense hatred he'd face in life because of his race, and thus has stayed with him ever since.

SETTING

The events in the poem take place on a streetcar in Baltimore, Maryland, presumably around the time Cullen wrote the poem in the 1920s. The speaker's reference to "old Baltimore" might be a simple term of affection (as in "good old Baltimore"), or might be a reference to the specific district of "Old Baltimore" (which today is known as the "Old West Baltimore Historic District"). Either way, readers get the sense that the young speaker was travelling away from home for the first time when this terrible "incident" occurred.

The poem itself, however, seems to take place many years later, with the now adult speaker looking back on a traumatic moment he was never able to forget. This distance between the speaker and the "incident" speaks to just how strongly the moment affected him.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Countee Cullen's work combined the traditions and techniques of traditional English literature (such as the ballad form used here in "Incident" or the sonnet form of "Yet Do I Marvel") with the everyday concerns of Black people and the reality of racism in America. *Color*, the collection in which "Incident" first appeared, was one of the major works that launched the Harlem Renaissance, and early 20th-century celebration of Black arts, culture, and politics that began in the predominantly Black neighborhood of Harlem in New York City.

Cullen was influenced from an early age by the great English

Romantic poets of the 18th century such as William Wordsworth, William Blake, and John Keats, whose poetry celebrated the natural world and the power of the individual. Despite writing during the rise of Modernism (which saw poets sharply breaking with rigid forms and experimenting with language and free verse), Cullen stuck to English poetic convention, both to prove that it was possible for a Black poet do so and simply because that's what he liked and had been formally educated in.

Cullen called for other Black artists to do the same, and while many Black thinkers and political leaders celebrated his work, he also lost favor among others for this appearance of catering to white audiences. Despite his cautioning other Black poets to steer away from writing too explicitly about race for fear of alienating such audiences, however, poems like "Incident" remain a powerful testament to the horrors of racial prejudice.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Cullen came of age in the 1920s, a time when racial segregation was still legal in many parts of the United States. In response to the lack of jobs and open discrimination of Jim Crow Laws in the South, many Black people began moving North with the belief that conditions would be more tolerable. This mass movement would come to be known as the Great Migration. A huge number of Black people settled in Harlem, New York, and thereabouts, leading to the Harlem Renaissance, a resurgence of Black artistic and intellectual life.

Though not always as overt in its racism as the South, the North was still extremely prejudiced. In response to the steady stream of Black people migrating to northern cities, many of those cities enacted racist housing legislation that ensured Black and white neighborhoods would remain separate.

"Incident" subtly references the reality of such segregation. "Old Baltimore," or West Baltimore, is a historic Maryland district that, by Cullen's day, had transformed into a predominantly Black neighborhood and housed a large percentage of the city's Black population. In this way, "old Baltimore" mirrored Harlem: as Black people were crammed together into undesirable old neighborhoods, their community and culture flourished even while their economic situation didn't—like Harlem, West Baltimore was an epicenter of Black culture and politics.

While Cullen lived in Harlem from the age of nine, it isn't entirely clear where he was born or where he lived prior to this time. The most likely options are Louisville, Kentucky, New York City, and Baltimore. In any case, it seems highly likely that he, like the speaker of this poem, spent some time in Baltimore as a child, and that the poem is based on an "incident" from his own life.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Cullen's Life and Work — A thorough introduction to Cullen by the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/countee-cullen)
- The Poem Out Loud — Listen to a recording of the poem read by Teyuna T. Darris. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KWeLzu8mlO4)
- Rita Dove on "Incident" — Former U.S. Poet Laureate Rita Dove reads and discusses "Incident" by Countee Cullen in this 2012 interview. (https://billmoyers.com/story/a-poet-a-day-rita-dove-reads-countee-cullen/)
- Old Baltimore — An article for Baltimore Magazine that connects the 2015 police killing of Freddie Gray and subsequent civil unrest to the city's long history of racial segregation. (https://www.baltimoremagazine.com/section/historypolitics/a-tale-of-two-cities-west-baltimore-before-after-freddie-gray/)
- The Harlem Renaissance — A brief overview of the Harlem Renaissance. (https://www.history.com/topics/roaring-twenties/harlem-renaissance#section_4)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER COUNTEE CULLEN POEMS

- From the Dark Tower
- Yet Do I Marvel

HOW TO CITE

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