Incident by Countee Cullen

Grades 6 to 12 | Interdisciplinary RST

Complete poem Incident

First Name

Last Name

Countee Cullen Color 1925

(For Eric Walrond)

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.

Source Countee Cullen, Color, Harper & Brothers, 1925, page 15. Public domain in the United States. Original wording and punctuation are retained. Line numbers used in this packet count the twelve poetic lines, excluding the title and dedication.

Reading agreement

The poem includes a racist slur that is the subject of critical study. Refer to it as “the racial slur” in discussion and responses. Focus on Cullen’s portrayal of harm, dignity, and memory. You do not need to repeat the slur aloud.

ELA How a brief encounter changes a memory

Essential question

How does Cullen use voice, contrast, structure, and memory to reveal the lasting impact of racial prejudice?

Reading A What the words reveal

The first stanza presents an eager child traveling through Baltimore. The paired descriptions of heart and head suggest joy filling both feeling and thought. The other child's stare first appears open to interpretation. The speaker's smile offers friendliness. The reply replaces that possibility with racial hostility.

The second stanza emphasizes that the children are similar in age and size. Physical similarity makes their unequal treatment more striking. The insult attempts to reduce the speaker to a degrading racial label. Cullen does not need a long speech to expose the cruelty. A gesture and a single word create the turning point.

The last stanza contrasts a wide span of places and months with one remembered encounter. The speaker describes the entire city, but narrows the ending to one event. This can suggest that racial humiliation overwhelms other memories of the visit. Read that ending as a powerful literary claim about the experience, not a clinical test of the speaker's memory.

Form and title

The poem has three stanzas of four lines each. In each stanza, the second and fourth lines rhyme. This orderly, songlike pattern contrasts with the disorder caused by prejudice. The restrained title can sound small beside the lasting harm described. That contrast creates irony. The first person speaker is a crafted poetic voice and should not automatically be equated with the poet's documented life.

Choose two details from different stanzas. Explain how their contrast helps develop a theme.

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