

Religious Aspects in Countee Cullen's Selected Poems

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Abstract:

This research examines the complex interplay of religious aspects in three selected poems by the American poet Countee Cullen: *Yet Do I Marvel*(1925), *The Wise*(1925), and *For a Poet* (1927). Countee delves into religious themes and symbolism within these poems. They reflect profound connection with spirituality, especially Christianity, and the conflict between religious belief and occasional mythological elements. Additionally, there are suggestions of pagan or classical impacts that reflect his involvement with both Christian and non-Christian traditions. Therefore, the question of the research is How does this poet use religious themes and symbolism from both Christian and pagan traditions in his poems 'Yet Do I Marvel,' 'The Wise,' and 'For a Poet' to explore issues of faith, identity, death, and the nature of reality. The researcher uses the Reader- Response approach and interpretive literary analysis to examine the chosen poems to meet the study's goal. The conclusion finds out that Cullen poetically, makes the speakers of these sonnets seek solace and guidance from the natural world, reflecting pagan beliefs in the interconnectedness of life and death. His masterful weaving of these diverse influences creates poems that are both deeply personal and universally resonant. Investigating the interplay between Christian and pagan elements illuminates light on his complex worldview and his unique contribution to American literature.

Keywords: (Christian, pagan, faith, death, nature).

الجوانب الدينية في قصائد مختارة للشاعر كونتي كولين

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المخلص:

يتناول هذا البحث التفاعل المعقد بين الجوانب الدينية في ثلاث قصائد مختارة للشاعر الأمريكي كونتي كولين: "ومع ذلك أتعجب" (١٩٢٥)، و"الحكيم" (١٩٢٥)، و"من أجل شاعر" (١٩٢٧). ويتعمق كونتي في الموضوعات الدينية والرمزية داخل هذه القصائد. وهي تعكس انخراطاً عميقاً في الروحية، وخاصة المسيحية، والصراع بين المعتقد الديني والعناصر الأسطورية العرضية. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، هناك اقتراحات بتأثيرات وثنية أو كلاسيكية تعكس انخراطه في التقاليد المسيحية وغير المسيحية. لذلك فإن سؤال البحث هو كيف يستخدم هذا الشاعر الموضوعات والرمزية الدينية من التقاليد المسيحية والوثنية في قصائده "ومع ذلك أتعجب" و"الحكيم" و"من أجل الشاعر" لاستكشاف قضايا الإيمان والهوية والموت وطبيعة الواقع؟ ويستخدم الباحث نهج استجابة القارئ والتحليل الأدبي التفسيري لفحص القصائد المختارة لتحقيق هدف الدراسة. وتبين الخاتمة أن الشاعر يمكن من جعل المتحدثين بهذه السوناتا يبحثون عن العزاء والإرشاد من العالم الطبيعي، مما يعكس المعتقدات الوثنية في الترابط بين الحياة والموت. إن نسجه الماهر لهذه التأثيرات المتنوعة يخلق قصائد شخصية للغاية وذات صدى عالمي. إن التحقيق في التفاعل بين العناصر المسيحية والوثنية يلقي الضوء على نظريته المعقدة للعالم ومساهمته الفريدة في الأدب الأمريكي. الكلمات المفتاحية: (العناصر المسيحية، العناصر الوثنية، الإيمان، الموت، الطبيعة).

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Introduction

Countee Cullen (1903–1946), an African-American poet, playwright and novelist, stands out as a prominent figure in the Harlem Renaissance (1925). He embodies a narrative characterized by youthful enthusiasm and exceptional talent. His life unfolds as the story of a rising star that illuminates

the African-American realm before gradually descending beyond horizon, where his poetic fame had declined by 1930. In his early stages, Cullen immersed himself in the heart of Black politics and culture in the United States. He also gained recognition connected with a noteworthy priest who would eventually become the president of the Harlem chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) (Kuenz, 2007: 50). The NAACP was formed in 1909 when progressive Whites joined forces with young Blacks from the Niagara Movement, a group dedicated to securing full political and civil rights for African Americans.

Many researchers have employed Cullen as a subject in their studies. In 2007, a case study was conducted by Jane Kuenz in her article "Modernism, Mass Culture, and the Harlem Renaissance: The Case of Countee Cullen". Another prominent article was written during Cullen's life by B. L. Woodruff, which titled "The Poetic Philosophy of Countee Cullen" (1940). Gabriel, O. U. (2021), also tackled Cullen in "The Indictment of God and the American Society in Countee Cullen's Poetry" (2021) in which he asserts that Cullen's poetry can resonate with people, and can be used as a weapon for change in any nation as his poetry addresses the contemporary needs of a society. In "Imagery and Figures of Speech In Countee Cullen's poems" (2011), E. Tiyanah examines the rhetorical images and figures of speech in Cullen's poetry.

Cullen gained prominence for his exploration of themes such as race, identity, and spirituality. His themes range from love to failure and religion. Surprisingly, his poetry is not commonly associated with explicit pagan

elements. Instead, his verses frequently reflect Christian themes and influences that impact society. His poetic expression is characterized by a reliance on biblical imagery and Christian symbolism, weaving a tapestry that highlights his engagement with these spiritual and religious motifs (Gruesser, 2022: 34).

The poet admits that change is inevitable in life, whether in the world around him or in human experiences. at times, he tries to rise above or escape this changing world by using his "visionary imagination" in his poems . However, despite his attempts to make change, he often comes to accept the fact that existence itself is temporary and always in flux. Sometimes he attempts to transcend the changing world through his visionary imagination, but he often arrives at an understanding and an acceptance of the transient nature of existence. A conflict between these two perspectives leads to a series of tensions and contrasts in both content and style as he explores the human condition. This tension is reflected in the content (what the poems explore) and style (how the poems are written) of his work.

Regarding religion, Cullen navigated a wayward path, progressing from early uncertainty to eventual Christian acceptance. Religious poems may express profound gratitude and revenge, or they might question the existence of God and the intricacies of religious doctrine. The present study is solely concerned with the Christian and pagan elements in selected poems by Countee.

In his youth, Cullen exhibited irony and defiance during moments of skepticism, as seen in "Heritage" (1925), where he suggested that a Black Christ might command his faith better than a White one. At the age of 24, he described his chief problem as reconciling a Christian upbringing with a pagan inclination; yet he remained unconvinced that this dilemma was insurmountable. Influenced by his grandmother Porter and the Cullen rectory, he gradually leaned towards Christian orthodoxy, despite his continued outrage over racial injustice. By 1929, during his height of fame, Cullen published a collection of poetry called "The Black Christ" (1925). The poems explore how African Americans' faith and justice relate to one another. Cullen compares African-Americans' suffering to that of Christ at his crucifixion in some of these poems. Cullen's optimistic aesthetic of racial pride and theological skepticism is captured in this collection of poems (Kelli, 2014, p. 19).

Like Blake in "The Tyger"(1794), Countee, in "The Black Christ" (1925), questions the nature of the furious and violent in the world. However, instead of concentrating on showcasing the tiger's strength and fury, Cullen inquires about the reasons that led to the crucifixion of Christ.

During World War I, Cullen posthumously published "On These I Stand," a previously unpublished poem titled "Christus natus EST," which means ' Christ has been borne. He reaffirms his enduring religious commitment as a coping mechanism for life's injustices and disappointments. Despite the wartime tragedies, the poem declares that "The manger still / Outshines the

throne" and asserts that "Christ must and will / Come to his own" (Molesworth, 2012: 63-65).

Cullen's poetry sought equilibrium between recognizing the harsh realities of racial inequality and aspiring for universal themes like love, loss, faith, and doubt to prevail. Critics often used the term "color blindness" to describe Cullen's aesthetic goals. His debut work, "Color" (1925), marked him as a formidable voice, generating anticipation for a promising literary career that could carve out new spaces for Black American identity in print. Despite occasionally addressing racial themes, Cullen's formal writing style aligned more with older European traditions than with the emerging modern ones. Notably, his significant poetry collection, "The Black Christ and Other Poems" (1929), portrayed a Black Christ, showcasing his unique approach within the poetic landscape.

Christian elements are apparent in poems like "The Wise", where the speaker contemplates the wisdom of the dead and longs for their "cool immunity". Similarly, "Yet Do I Marvel" expresses a sense of wonder and awe at the divine creation, echoing Christian themes of grace and salvation. At the same time, he celebrates his African ancestry and connects with the cyclical processes of nature in "For a poet".

"Yet Do I Marvel" (1925) is known for its exploration of the complexities of faith and the ironic questioning of God's design in the face of racial injustice. Gabriel (2021: 53) indicates that this poem refers to faith. It is one of the Christian elements. Cullen asks, "Why does God allow so much suffering to

occur?" This poem takes the form of a sonnet. but, it is not a traditional one. In the poem, Cullen reflects on the challenges and struggles he faces as an African American in a society marked by racism.

As A. E. (2016: 92-3) states Cullen's religious poetry depicts an agonizing duality and an expresses ambivalence about the tragedy of the black man. Religion is seen as a tool used by the poet to depict Countee Cullen, the black man, as an existential victim and to represent agony in his poetry, along with the associated melancholy and lamentations. In this sense, the lachrymal and somber mood permeates Cullen's poetry.

Despite his faith in God, he grapples with the paradoxes of his existence, pondering why God, who is supposed to be just and benevolent, has created a world where he is marginalized and faces adversity. The title of this poem encapsulates the paradoxical nature of the speaker's contemplation. The poem is a thoughtful and introspective exploration of the tension between faith and the harsh realities of racial inequality. Cullen's use of the sonnet form adds a sense of strict structure and discipline to the expression of these profound and challenging ideas.

In this sonnet, the poet portrays the Christian elements through the speaker's contemplation of the divine attributes and the mysterious nature of God's actions. He expresses a complex relationship between himself and God, touching upon themes of faith, suffering, and divine purpose. He implies this in the following lines:

I doubt not God is good, well-meaning, kind,
And did His stoop to quibble could tell why
The little buried mole continues blind,
Why flesh that mirrors Him must someday die, (Cullen's Yet Do I Marvel, 1925, Lines 1-4).

The opening lines convey a belief in God's goodness, well-meaning nature, and kindness. Cullen acknowledges a positive and benevolent aspect of God's figure.

The pagan elements appear as the poet reflects on the apparent contradictions and challenges in the world, such as the blindness of the mole, the inevitability of human mortality, and the suffering of figures from mythology like Tantalus and Sisyphus. The following lines clarify the pagan elements:

Make plain the reason tortured Tantalus
Is baited by the fickle fruit, declare
If merely brute caprice dooms Sisyphus
To struggle up a never-ending stair (Cullen's Yet Do I Marvel, 1925, Lines 5-9).

These references draw from classical mythology but are used here to contemplate theodicy (the justification of God's grace and kindness in the

light of evil) and to question why a benevolent and all-powerful God allows suffering and injustice. Cullen emphasizes the inscrutable nature of God's ways, indicating that they are beyond human understanding. The poet acknowledges the limitations of the human mind and its inability to comprehend the divine plan. He expresses a sense of marvel and wonder at the peculiar and mysterious nature of God's actions. Despite acknowledging God's benevolence, the poet is perplexed by certain aspects of divine creation and intervention. Cullen also reveals some pagan elements as the following lines indicate:

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 (Cullen's Yet Do I Marvel, 1925.
Lines 6-10)

The concluding lines introduce an ironic twist. Cullen marvels at the paradoxical decision of God to "make a poet black, and bid him sing." Here, the poet, who is supposed to find solace and expression through the act of singing, seems to question why God would choose this particular identity marked by historical and societal challenges. Yet Do I Marvel engages with Christian themes by exploring the complexities of divine nature, the proof of

God's goodness and providence in light of evil's existence, and the poet's own place in God's plan (Eyang, 2016:94). The poem grapples with the mysteries of existence and the apparent contradictions in the world, blending classical references with a poignant reflection on the poet's identity within the divine order. Thus, the speaker is amazed by the unknowable essence of God, but the poem concludes with an acknowledgment of the mysterious nature of the divine.

"The Wise (1925)": Wisdom is a sense of a higher purpose in creating poetry, which may be seen as an attempt to reach something, sacred or transcendent. Its meaning is vast, encompassing all secular and religious traditions of the world,

A wise person is someone who truly understands God and possesses a kind of awareness of God's reality that allows knowing that God exists. He/ she understands the central concepts of human existence, and thus knows how to live well, therefore, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Fear is a negative and unworthy emotion and plays a minor role in the character of a wise person. However, from a biblical perspective, one could argue that the wise person is not someone who lacks fear, but rather someone who fears not doing the right things. To "fear the Lord" is to fear displeasing God, to fear breaking the relationship with God (Evans, 2010: 378-379). Cullen chose to title this poem "The Wise," depicting death as an elevated state of existence. Akgoz indicated that "within the verses, he extols the virtues of these 'Dead men' for their unique vantage point; they witness the world's

evolution without being tethered to the spectrum of positive and negative emotions (2021: 52-53).” Liberated from the constraints of feelings, they solely engage in observation. Consequently, this detachment grants them a profound comprehension of both facets, endowing them with wisdom. The following lines illustrate these elements:

Dead men are wisest, for they know
How far the roots of flowers go,
How long a seed must rot to grow
Dead men alone bear frost and rain
On throb less heart and heatless brain,
And feel no stir of joy or pain (Cullen’s The Wise, 1925: 1-6).

In the realm of Christian elements, the poem opens with the speaker stating, "Dead men are wisest," suggesting a Christian association of death as a gateway to knowledge and wisdom. This aligns with the Christian belief in the afterlife, where the soul gains a deeper understanding of God and the universe. The reference to "throb less heart and heatless brain": This imagery alludes to the Christian idea of the soul as separate from the physical body. After death, the body becomes lifeless (troubling heart and heatless brain), while the soul continues its existence.

Dead men alone are satiate;
They sleep and dream and have no weight,
To curb their rest, of love or hate.

Strange, men should flee their company,
Or think me strange who long to be
Wrapped in their cool immunity (Cullen's *The Wise*, 1925: 7-12).

The concept of "cool immunity" suggests a sense of peace and freedom from the emotions and burdens of the living. This aligns with the Christian concept of salvation and eternal rest in heaven. In the realm of pagan elements, there is an emphasis on nature. Lines like "How far the roots of flowers go, / How long a seed must rot to grow" highlight the importance of nature and the cyclical process of life and death. This connects to pagan belief systems that often revere the natural world and its underlying cycles. The poem portrays dead men as possessing superior knowledge and insight (Shucard, 1971:62-46).

This aligns with the pagan practice of ancestor worship, where the dead are revered for their wisdom and guidance. The speaker's eagerness to meet the dead and experience their state of "cool immunity" could be interpreted as a yearning for a pagan-like release from the burdens of the physical world. However, Cullen's poem skillfully blends both Christian and pagan themes.

While the Christian elements offer a perspective on death as a path to knowledge and eternal rest, the pagan elements emphasize the wisdom of the natural world and the interconnectedness of life and death (ibid, 52). This combination creates a unique and nuanced exploration of death and its meaning. The poem can be interpreted as a critique of the fear and stigma

surrounding death in Western society. By praising the "cool immunity" of the dead, Cullen challenges the negative connotations often associated with death. The poem's ambiguity allows for multiple interpretations, reflecting the complex nature of death and its varying interpretations across different cultures and religions.

1. 5. "For a Poet (1921)": In this sonnet, Cullen reflects on the poet's place within society, seeking to grasp the significance of their words and their ability to influence truth. Though this poem does not directly mention pagan or mythological beings, its themes reflect pagan notions regarding the poet's role as a seer in ancient societies. In the traditions of Greece and Rome, poets such as Homer and Virgil were seen as more than mere artists; they were revered as embodiments of divine inspiration and frequently called upon the gods (whether in a pagan context or in the classical divine sense) as the wellspring of their poetic strength (Guerber & Guerber, 1993:1). According to the content of this poem, Christian and pagan elements are clarified in this poem. Christian elements are clear through the following lines:

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 the moth,
I have wrapped my dreams in a silken cloth (Cullen's For a Poet, 1921: 1-4).

The Christian elements are represented by the themes of sacrifice and self-denial. The act of wrapping dreams in "a silken cloth" and locking them away "in a box of gold" can be seen as a metaphor for sacrifice and self-denial. This bring into line with the Christian concept of giving up earthly desires and ambitions in pursuit of a higher spiritual purpose (Gilliam, 2012:177) The gold box could symbolize the divine realm where the poet's dreams are stored. This connects to the Christian belief in an afterlife where true happiness and fulfillment are found. The mention of the "moth's lips" could be interpreted as a reference to the Christian image of the moth drawn to a flame, representing the soul's yearning for God, and the afterlife. Meanwhile the pagan elements are represented by dreams as a source of knowledge and insight. The poem emphasizes the importance of dreams, suggesting they hold hidden wisdom and understanding. This aligns with the pagan belief that dreams offer a glimpse into the spirit world and can provide guidance and inspiration to free humans from disturbing emotions such as pity or empathy (Dolan, 2021). The use of "a silken cloth" and "a box of gold" could be interpreted as a reference to the pagan association of silk and gold with prosperity and abundance. However, in this context, they may represent the poet's desire to preserve his dreams in a manner befitting their precious value. The moth can also be seen as a symbol of transformation and rebirth, connecting to the pagan cyclical understanding of life and death. The moth's metamorphosis from larva to winged creature could represent the poet's aspirations for spiritual growth and change. While the Christian themes

suggest a focus on sacrifice and the pursuit of a spiritual reward, the pagan themes emphasize the importance of dreams, intuition, and the natural world. This representation is evident as follows:

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 away in a box of gold (Cullen's For a poet, 1921: 5-8).

This fusion creates a complex exploration of the poet's inner life and aspirations. The poem's repetitive refrain, "I have wrapped my dreams in a silken cloth," emphasizes the poet's protective nature towards his dreams and his desire to preserve them for the future. The poem can also be understood as a reflection on the challenges of being a poet in a society that may not value or understand the power of dreams and imagination. Here, Cullen wavers between believing he has overcome time by figuratively wrapping his dreams in a silken cloth and locking them away in the golden box of poetry, and seeing death as the assassin who slays the artist before he can fulfill himself and attain immortality (Shucard, 1971: 106). However, Cullen's skillful use of imagery and symbolism in "For a Poet" invites the reader to contemplate the complex relationship between Christian and pagan beliefs, particularly in the context of artistic expression and the pursuit of self-knowledge.

Conclusion

Cullen's poems analyzed in this study showcase his adeptness at merging aspects of paganism and Christianity. He expressed both reverence and fascination for the gods and Christianity, all while countering accusations of atheism.

A common thread running through his writings is his keen awareness that everything must change. Sometimes, he attempted to transcend the changing world through his visionary imagination, but often he came to understand and accept of the transient nature of existence. A conflict between these two views leads to a series of tensions and contrasts in both content and style as he explores the human condition.

Cullen is unstable in his journey from doubt to acceptance as a Christian. It is uncommon to associate his poetry with overtly pagan themes. Rather, he often uses Christian ideas and influences in his verses, which have an impact on society. His use of Christian symbolism and biblical imagery in his poetry is what makes his work distinctive; it is a tapestry reflecting his interest in these spiritual and religious themes. Nevertheless, it is clear that Cullen's skillful blending of these many inspirations results in poetry that is both intimate and relevant to everyone. Examining how Christian and pagan components interact highlight his nuanced worldview and his distinctive contribution to American literature.

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