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## UNIT 18: COUNTEE CULLEN'S *LINES TO MY FATHER* AND LANGSTON HUGHES' *LET AMERICA BE AMERICA AGAIN*

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### Structure

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### 18.0 OBJECTIVES

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After reading this unit you will be able to:

- Know about the history of African-American community's arrival in America
- Become familiar with the history of this community's struggles
- Connect the movement known as Harlem Renaissance with these struggles
- Identify the two major strains of writers involved with Harlem Renaissance
- Close-Read the two poems mentioned above

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### 18.1 INTRODUCTION

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#### 18.1.1 Genesis of the African-American community in America

As suggested by the very name, the community of African-Americans is a hybrid ethnic group. They are born out of a mixing of two ethnic groups who reside at a distance of nearly nine thousand miles. Looking at the sheer enormity of this distance the first question that arises is what actually led to this crossing over? The historical accounts of this community suggest that it was a result of a forced migration. The documentary entitled *The African Americans: Many Rivers to Cross* with Henry Louis Gates, Jr tells: "In the

360 years between 1500 and the end of the slave trade in the 1860s, at least 12 million Africans were forcibly taken to the Americas - then known as the "New World" to European settlers. This largest forced migration in human history relocated some 50 ethnic and linguistic groups". For their shippers these migrated lot might be simply Africans but in reality they were members of different African tribes marked by their individual cultures. In the soil of America these people of diverse nature were actually forced to lose their unique tribal identities and get transformed into a new hybrid ethnic group- the African-Americans. These people did consist of members of Native American and European lineage but they were predominantly a pan-African group residing in America.

### **18.1.2 Overview of the Changing Position of the Community**

The community did begin as slaves at its initial stage but along with time their position in America underwent a remarkable change. Harlem Renaissance is certainly one of the manifestations of this changing position hence before talking about this event itself, it seems important to explore the events preceding it that had a significant impact on the community's liberation. From 1619 to 1808, the importing of Africans to America for slavery continued officially. Though this importing was outlawed in 1808, the practice had already gathered millions of slaves. As the white population of America, especially the Southern people, were unwilling to accept these Africans forced to live in America as free citizens; the condition of these coloured people did not improve at all by the stopping of slave importing. Gradually these Africans living in America started revolting and America witnessed a number of reactions against the discrimination against the black people throughout the nineteenth century. People like Nat Turner or John Brown attempted to fight the perpetrators of slavery by force and though both were hanged after killing a few opponents, their revolts certainly gave the growing agitation against the slave owners a definite shape. The abolitionists started protesting against slavery in an organized way and this movement took a significant turn from the 1830s with the beginning of the publication of *The Liberator* by William Lloyd Garrison. Another notable instance of the rising of the black people was the case of the slave named Dred Scott who sought help from the legal system for gaining freedom. The biased Supreme Court did deny Scott his due but their hypocrisy infuriated the northern Americans and made them aware of the oppressed state of the blacks in a vivid manner. After the Civil War of 1861 the emancipation of the slaves finally got a legal sanction but during the post-slavery era further agitations against the blacks began when laws like the Black Codes were passed during 1865. The white supremacists formed notorious groups like "Ku Klux Klan" for fighting the blacks during this time. In short, the nineteenth century, especially its second half was a time of attacks and counterattacks for the blacks.

### **18.1.3 African-Americans in the Twentieth Century and Harlem Renaissance**

During the early years of the twentieth century the African-Americans saw the rise of a few men of their own community as influential persons. Unlike the chief leaders of the previous century, these new generation of African-

Americans had either financial strength or the reputation of a scholar. They had managed to become voices to reckon with following different paths and revolutionary changes started to appear when they tried to impart their mantra of success to their fellow African-Americans. For instance, Booker Taliaferro Washington, who had become a known face amongst the circle of wealthy Americans insisted that the blacks should develop skills as technicians or workers of various industries for becoming a part of the American core population occupied by the whites. He tried to make the community become one with the whites but did not speak about the importance of the individuality of the blacks. William Edward Burghardt Du Bois drew their attention to the need for considering their community as an individual one instead of merely thinking themselves as an extension of the whites. Du Bois was a scholar. He was the first of these black Americans who earned a doctorate degree and moving a step ahead from Washington, he suggested that salvation lay in embracing education and nurturing a unique culture. When Du Bois acted as one of the main founding members of NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) in 1909, he had the educational and cultural development of his fellow people as his chief goal. These seeds sown by Du Bois soon evolved into what is known as Harlem Renaissance today.

#### **18.1.4 About Harlem Renaissance**

Looking at the impact of the event on the African Americans, it seems better to call it a revolution rather than a renaissance. For these people of African origin it brought a change that was hardly seen previously. Hence it was less a 're-awakening' and more an awakening that occurred surrounding a particular place in the 1920s. Stephen Matterson describes the event saying: "The renaissance mainly involved a group of writers and intellectuals associated (often loosely) with Harlem, the district of Manhattan that during the Great Migration of African Americans from rural South, became the major centre for urbanized blacks"(96). Matterson's entries inform that by 1930s no less than 2 million black people had migrated to north. In the urban space of northern America they could be free from the brutalities of the South and as a result of their proximity to the gloss of cities, they started updating themselves in a remarkable manner. This movement took place at a time when the entire world of Western literature was undergoing a sea change as a result of the emergence of Modernism. These African American writers too joined the wave of embracing novelty in their own ways. Practitioners of Modernism in general considered the mixing of the traditional and the new an integral part of their agenda. In the hands of these African Americans, this agenda became an effective medium of portraying their African heritage and Americanness together. For white writers like Eugene O' Neill, African American identity was mostly related with primitivism, as shown in the play *The Emperor Jones*(1920). Harlem Renaissance helped in developing the awareness that urbanity too had become an integral part of African American culture. Alain Locke's essay, published as an introduction to the collection entitled *The New Negro*(1925) gave voice to this movement for the first time. The term "New Negro" became synonymous with the movement and it referred to the newly developed awareness in the African Americans about their unique identity. For them, being black no longer meant being

backward. They started believing in their own culture like never before. Like many other movements, however, Harlem Renaissance too had exponents who had their differences. While a section of this movement insisted that the only purpose of an African American writer should be the voicing of the problems faced by their community, a second group intended to establish themselves not just as African American writers but writers dedicated to universal concerns. The key strain of thoughts of these two groups maybe understood from the poetry of Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen, respectively.

Countee Cullen's *Lines to My Father* and Langston Hughes' *Let America Be America Again*

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## 18.2 BOUT LANGSTON HUGHES (1901-1967)

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This Missouri born poet is called a “poet laureate of the race” for African-Americans by Lisa Hollenbach. He introduced an interesting form of poetry to the American poetry in general which eventually became known as “Jazz Poetry”. He fused syncopated rhythms, a coded and figurative language referred as “Jive language” which, for example described a guitar as “Belly-Fiddle”, to poetry that used colloquial language as far as practicable in order to develop this fusion of Jazz music and poetry. He wrote more than fifteen collections of poems along with a notable number of novels, plays, short stories, essays and children’s literature.

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## 18.3 “LET AMERICA BE AMERICA AGAIN”: ANALYSIS

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One of the most iconic poems by Langston Hughes, “Let America...” was written during the 1930s which is infamously known as the Depression era in American culture. However, rather than being a dated text, the poem’s key argument eventually became one of the most popular slogans of American leaders like John Kerry. The key ideas of the poem will be analyzed in this section. Though written as one undivided text, the poem appears to have three distinct yet interrelated sections in it and this section will analyze it using the same.

- 1) The first sixteen lines show interplay between a prayer that asks for returning America to its ideal state and a voice captured in parenthesis that keeps reminding that America was never great for this individual speaker or a certain group that this individual speaker is a representative of. In these lines America of the glorious past is described as a land of liberty, equal opportunities, and a space where the time honored traditions of exploiting the common people has been done away with. These assertions are followed by short yet very strong interjections that remind that America has never really been an ideal land for the speaker of these interjections.
- 2) The first portion is followed by a longer and descriptive portion running nearly fifty lines that reveal the identities of the people represented in the interjections mentioned above and their respective sufferings. These people are requested by the narratorial voice to reveal their identities and they inform that they are literally a multitude of sufferers. They consist of poor white men, black people, the natives of America described by the ruling white people as “Red”, and all the immigrants



that ever arrived in America. All of them had come to America or hoped sincerely that America will make a difference but in reality they saw the gradual rise of the cruel, inhuman, exploiters all around who simply imitated the scheme of the tyrants that centers around the exploitation of the poor. Apart from these minority groups, the voice is described to be a representative of the young men, the farmer, the worker, and the black slaves. All of them are strong and capable enough for leading America to a bright future but the select few who run the nation never allow them to proceed. Instead the potential, the power of these honest workers are sold cheap and put at the service of the greedy rich people. Ironically it is these exploited and mishandled people who are the pillars of the dream about America's greatness. In short, these lines explain why America is no longer the America of "American Dream".

- 3) Finally, the concluding section wraps the poem with the hope of a better future despite all the hopelessness. It addresses the exploiters and informs with great confidence that they can brand these exploited people who are now declaring a war for reclaiming America as abhorrent or evil but they will not stop. They will bring a revolutionary change that will ultimately have the American Dream realized all over. The last section mentions the source of sufferings for the exploited and ends very confidently with an assurance that America will definitely become great again. Overall, the poem reflects Hughes's strong belief in the ideals of Harlem Renaissance as well as his Marxist ideology. Though written primarily for the black people, this poem ultimately speaks for every single person who has been affected by the selfish rich people who turned American dream into a nightmare.

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#### **18.4 ABOUT COUNTTEE PORTER CULLEN (1903-1946)**

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Details of the early life of Countee Cullen are quite obscure. Name of his real father is still unknown. The surname "Cullen" became a part of his identity after he got adopted by Reverend Frederick Cullen. His consistent achievements as a student make him look no less than a prodigy. Apart from earning degrees in challenging courses like classical literatures, Cullen drew the attention of many for his talent in creative works like writing poetry, delivering speeches, etc. His maturity as a writer earned him the opportunity to become an associate editor of his school's journal *The Magpie*. His first collection of poems known as *Color* was published the same year he became a graduate. The poem by Cullen featured in this module, that is, "Lines to My Father" belongs to Cullen's second collection of poems known as *Copper Sun* (1927). Subsequently the poem was anthologized in *My Soul's High Song: The Collected Writings of Countee Cullen* (1991).

As mentioned before, Cullen's poems represent a section of Harlem Renaissance writers that attempted to engage with issues outside the African-American struggle for emancipation. The poem "Lines to My Father," however, serves not just as a representative text depicting Cullen's attempts to move beyond the recurrent thoughts that dominated the writings

of Langston Hughes and the like. Rather, the poem appears to be a subtle voicing of the African-Americans' sufferings beneath philosophical musings that have a universal significance.

Countee Cullen's *Lines to My Father* and Langston Hughes' *Let America Be America Again*

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## 18.5 "LINES TO MY FATHER": ANALYSIS

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The poem is apparently a brief message to a person the speaker calls his (though it is not clear whether this anonymous speaker is male or female, keeping the poem's connections with the poet's life or the condition of his community, which the following paragraphs will explain, it seems proper to assume that the speaker is male) father. This poem is comparatively more symbolic than the other poem discussed in this unit and these symbols have a Christian overtone.

To begin with, the poem alludes to the biblical saying about sowing and reaping. The Second Epistle to the Corinthians featured in the New Testament proclaims: "... whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly" (9:6) and the opening line of Cullen's poem alludes to it with a twist. Unlike the biblical line it speaks of a discrepancy between the people who sow and the people who reap. According to the poem sowing, the comparatively more laborious task of the two, is done by many but reaping, which though tiresome, is definitely more satisfactory in terms of immediate gains, is done by a select few. Though universal in tone, this statement appears to be grounded in the discriminatory situation that African-Americans were placed during Cullen's time. The African-Americans would do the hard work for the development of America but the benefits would mostly be enjoyed by the whites.

After this poignant beginning the poem continues to speak of the sufferings of hard-working people. The poet beautifully maintains the obliqueness by making the lines speak of universal as well as the sufferings of his own community. In continuation with the idea of the sufferings of the people engaged in sowing, the poem starts speaking of the minuscule presence of relief and joy in the lives of these hard-working people. They can enjoy the soothing moments of rest only when the daytime gets shortened and night gets lengthened by prolonged darkness, that is, only when due to the natural conditions they get to cease their work earlier than their schedule, they get to rest and soothe the "smart" that is "pain" of otherwise consistent grief of their daily lives. These laboring people, according to the poem, have very little expectations from life. All it takes is a slight sign of a good harvest to make them ecstatic. They are so habituated to "indigence" meaning their sufferings; that the arrival of a single flower makes them happy. In short, they live for working and know nothing beyond hard work.

After these meaningful descriptions about these hard-working people the poem shifts its focus on the speaker's father. This section of the poem reveals significant details about the identity of this "father" and further explicates the poem's central idea. The speaker requests his father to take a look around and witness the impact the seeds he had sown have had. It is important to note that the speaker associates his father with people engaged in sowing at this point. Just like them, the speaker's father too had sown seeds and as a result trees bearing ripe fruit with golden hue, signifying these fruits' purity,

have grown in abundance all over. After this sensuous description of the trees and fruits, the speaker explains the actual nature of the system that his father has created. This system is entirely based on hard-work. The father has set things in motion by sowing seeds and the subsequent generations must keep the rhythm of creation sprung thusly by way of hard-work. In return they will definitely get a beautiful world filled with ripeness but they must earn it. The system the father has created will never let them simply inherit things from idle wishful thinking. The speaker adds a note of praise for his father stating that the father has hired these people who need to work for continuing the father's good work, only after he became sure about their capabilities. The use of capitalization in the line "From One Who holds His servants worth their hire." sums up the questions about the father's identity by implying that the speaker is addressing God himself.

Towards the end the poem takes an interesting turn by pointing out that this great harvest that the father's sowing has given birth to was not really desired by the father without any doubts. Rather, it was "the shyest" of his dreams, meaning the father, the Almighty too was not really sure that someday the earth will look so beautifully ripened. Yet this dream has come true and more importantly, the dream does not at all look fragile. Instead, it looks solid as rock. This dream, according to the speaker, can be "impregnated," that is grown further but it will require the involvement of hard-working people. Hence, the conclusion that the poem features in between the lines insists that the people enjoying undue advantages, mentioned in the opening line, will fall short of the capability required for carrying on the father's work. Overall, the poem carries a universal significance by allegorically highlights the importance of hard-working people in general and yet it speaks volumes about the African-Americans too. It is a poem of hope and though the messages of hope it imparts are meaningful for readers across time and culture, the true significance of these rays of hope is definitely perceived better when seen through the lens of contemporary African-American history.

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### 18.6 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (QUESTIONS WITH ANSWER KEYS)

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a) Describe the socio-historical background of Harlem Renaissance.

Ans: Your answer should begin mentioning the history of African-American community's development and growth in America. Thereafter, you need to explain how the change in this community (in the form of literacy, participation in power structure, etc.) gradually led to the development of Harlem Renaissance.

b) Assess the contribution of Langston Hughes as a poet of Harlem Renaissance.

Ans. You should start by outlining Hughes' life and his involvement with the movement. In terms of his contribution, stress should be given to how his poems spoke for bringing about revolutionary changes to America. Along with the poem on your syllabus you should also refer to a few other poems by Hughes, namely "Harlem," "I, Too," etc.

- c) Critically comment on the central idea of the poem "Let America Be America Again".

Ans. You should close-read the poem and sum up its contents following the leads given above. Conclude your answer by relating the poem's idea of bringing the true face of American nation back with the Harlem Renaissance's notion of uplifting the African-Americans.

- d) Assess the contribution of Countee Cullen as a poet of Harlem Renaissance/ Assess the distinctive features of Cullen's poetry that gives him a unique position amongst the poets of Harlem Renaissance.

Ans. You have to outline the key differences between Cullen and other writers of Harlem Renaissance like Hughes by explaining how Cullen refused to indulge in out and out political and propagandist writings. You should substantiate your arguments by referring to the poem on your syllabus. However, references to other poems like "Yet do I Marvel," "The Wise," "The Loss of Love," may also be given.

- e) Explain the Christian symbolism used in "Lines to My Father".

Ans. You should refer to the discussion on the poem mentioned above. You can also attempt to relate the poem's central ideas with Cullen's childhood upbringing in the house of his foster father who himself was a devout Christian.

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## 18.7 SUMMING UP

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As stated above, after going through these discussions you should now be able to:

- Explain the factors behind the rise of Harlem Renaissance
- Distinguish between the two major strains of writings associated with Harlem Renaissance
- Critically explain the poems on your syllabus in the light of Harlem Renaissance
- Comment on the images used in the poems on your syllabus

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## 18.8 SELECT READING LIST

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*The Cambridge Companion to the Harlem Renaissance* Edited By George B. Hutchinson, Cambridge University Press, 2007

*A Langston Hughes Encyclopedia* by Hans Ostrom, Greenwood Press, 2002.

*Langston Hughes: Critical Perspectives Past And Present* Edited by Henry Louis Gates Jr. and K.A. Appiah, Harper, 2000.

*Montage of a Dream: The Art and Life of Langston Hughes* Edited by John Edger Tidwell and Cheryl R. Ragar, University of Missouri, 2007.

*Countee Cullen* by Alan Shucard, Twayne, 1984.

Harlem Renaissance by Nathan Huggins, Oxford University Press, 2007.



**Early Twentieth Century**

Countee Cullen papers, 1900-1947, Amistad Research Center, <http://amistadresearchcenter.tulane.edu/archon/?p=collections/controlcard&id=41>

“Langston Hughes’s Cold War Audiences: Black Internationalism, The Popular Front, and The Poetry of the Negro, 1746-1949” by John Lowney, *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26434716?seq=1>

“The American Dream of Langston Hughes” by James Presley, *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43467552?seq=1>

“The Poetic Philosophy of Countee Cullen” by Bertram L. Woodruff, *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/271989?seq=1>

“The Poetics of Conjecture: Countee Cullen’s Subversive Exemplarity” by Jeremy Braddock, *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3300283?seq=1>



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