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## LOVE AND DEATH IN THE POETRY OF LANGSTON HUGHES AND CUNTEE CULLEN UNDER JIM CROW SOCIETY

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines the crisis of racial identity in the poetry of Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen within the socio-political context of the Jim Crow era. By focusing on the interrelated motifs of love and death, this study argues that both poets articulate the fragmentation, displacement, and reconstruction of Black identity under systemic racial oppression. Drawing upon the theoretical framework of double consciousness as conceptualized by W. E. B. Du Bois and the psychological analysis of racial subjectivity developed by Frantz Fanon, this research situates their poetry within a broader discourse of racial modernity and existential crisis.

While Hughes employs blues aesthetics, vernacular rhythms, and collective voice to transform suffering into cultural affirmation, Cullen adopts classical forms and introspective meditation to express spiritual doubt and inner alienation. In Hughes's poetry, love often appears threatened by racial violence, yet it persists as communal resilience; death functions as political testimony against injustice. In contrast, Cullen's treatment of love reflects metaphysical yearning and emotional isolation, while death symbolizes existential dislocation and cultural estrangement.

Through close textual analysis and engagement with major critics of the Harlem Renaissance, this study demonstrates that both poets respond to Jim Crow not merely as historical reality but as a psychological regime shaping consciousness itself. Ultimately, their divergent poetic strategies reveal two complementary modes of resistance: cultural reconstruction and introspective confrontation. Together, Hughes and Cullen illuminate how artistic expression becomes a site for reclaiming identity amid racial suppression.

**Keywords:** jim crow; harlem renaissance; double consciousness; black identity; love and death; racial alienation; blues aesthetics; existential crisis; cultural reconstruction; modernism

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### INTRODUCTION

The Jim Crow era (1877–1965) was a period in U.S. history, primarily in the South, characterized by legalized racial segregation and disenfranchisement of African Americans. Named after a minstrel character, these state and local laws enforced "separate but equal" status, restricting access to public facilities, education, and voting, while upholding white supremacy.

The Jim Crow era institutionalized racial segregation and normalized anti-Black violence

within American civic life. More than a legal framework, it operated as a psychological regime that fractured Black subjectivity. The poetry of Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen emerges from this historical crisis. Through the recurring motifs of love and death, both poets interrogate the destabilization of African American identity under systemic racial oppression. (Wikipedia)

Drawing upon W. E. B. Du Bois' theory of double consciousness (Du Bois 8) and Frantz Fanon's account of racial subjectivity (Fanon 110), this paper argues that Hughes reconstructs identity through communal affirmation and blues aesthetics, while Cullen foregrounds spiritual alienation and existential doubt. Harlem Renaissance poets were engaged in deliberate acts of identity reconstruction in response to racial marginalization (Jindal 2).

### JIM CROW AS PSYCHOLOGICAL STRUCTURE

Jim Crow segregation functioned not only spatially but internally. Du Bois describes the “two-ness” experienced by Black Americans (9), a split that Hughes attempts to reconcile and Cullen often dramatizes as unresolved. Contemporary critics continue to reinterpret this condition. Alexandria Schultz argues that Harlem Renaissance poetry must be read as an articulation of racial consciousness and justice rather than merely aesthetic production (Schultz 4). Similarly, Muhammad Yusuf contends that Hughes's work shaped evolving conceptions of Black identity far beyond his historical moment (Yusuf 12). Under such pressures, love and death acquire intensified symbolic meaning.

### DEVELOPMENT

The poems of Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen make up for a lost identity in a Jim Crow society. On the other hand, it presents poems of physical and spiritual deaths which represent the ultimate result of Afro-American transgression and regression respectively. Their poetry is an over indulgence in Afro-American Romantic escapism, represented by a psychedelic world of love and death, which is the only alternative to the protest.

The self pity and death wish persist in and seem to dominate Cullen's works. Even his love poems are gloomy and morbid, whereas Hughes' love poems, models of his folk tradition, have strength and laughter by means of which the race has learnt to live with adversity. Hughes' and Cullen's concept of love is twofold, racial and non-racial. The former discuss the Afro-American's passion and how they should be directed towards black women. The latter shows a kaleidoscopic vision that reflects a disturbed psyche. Therefore, love and death intermingle.

Image of vegetation reflect Hughes' and Cullen's portrait of love. These images are central to the meaning of Hughes' “Love song for Lucinda” and Cullen's “The Love Tree”. Hughes' three stanza poem presents love through three natural images, starting with that of a tree. This image immortalizes Afro-American love, since a tree needs two of the essential elements of the universe for it to grow, water and earth.

Love  
Is a ripe plum  
Growing on a purple tree.  
Taste it once  
And the spell of its enchantment  
Will never let you be. (Rampersad 68)

The second stanza offers a skyscape where love is likened to a star. Being in the sky suggests both love's inaccessibility and detachment from everyday life and in the third stanza there is an image of a landscape where the remoteness of love is further stressed;

Love  
Is a high mountain  
Stark in a windy sky,  
If you  
Would never lose your breath,  
Do not climb too high. (Rampersad 68)

Since the image represents the only peaceful way to salvation, the poet wryly combines the skyscape and landscape which represent tempestuous surroundings. Therefore, there is little hope for salvation.

Cullen's "The Love Tree" is based on the visual image of planting love as if it were a seed. This reveals mutual love. The protagonist addresses his beloved:

Come, let us plant our love as farmers  
Plant  
A seed, and you shall water it with tears,  
And I shall weed it with my hands untill  
They bleed (Jackson 83)

Their mutual feelings are illustrated by images of the shedding of both tears and blood. The pessimistic atmosphere which hovers over the opening lines reflects the strong impact racism had on Afro-Americans.

Hughes' "Minnie Sings Her Blues" shows the fact that through jazz and dancing, Afro-Americans neglect their burdens and enjoy love, temporary though it may seem.

Cabaret, cabaret!  
That's where ma man an' me go,  
Cabaret, cabaret!  
That's where we go-  
Leaves de snow outside  
An' our troubles at de door. (Rampersad 68)

The last line of Cullen's "Love's Way" illustrates the role of music in reviving love;

...let me reviving some note  
Of music lost to you. This is love's way,  
That's where a heart is asked gives back a heart. (Jackson 89)

Moreover, in poems like "Words to My Love", "En Passant" and "Timid Lover", Cullen expresses two heterogeneous forms of love: platonic and epicurean. In "Timid Lover" Cullen discusses platonic love, which, to him, is of paramount importance. The title of the poem suggests a state of internal conflict. Feeling timid whenever he sees his lover, words fail him. Therefore, the poem is based on an imaginary dialogue where the protagonist give full vent to his emotions, while the supposed

lover listens.

Hughes's "Natcha" and Cullen's "En Passant" portray lustful lovers. In the first Cullen discusses the crooked nature of some. He celebrates the bohemian aspect of love being a fundamental part of human nature. He describes himself as a liar and his lover as a jade. This description prepares for the conclusion that both man and animals are on a par, thus disturbing the Chain of Being:

It is just the way things come to pass,  
And men and mice are made. (Jackson 74)

Hughes' "Natcha" reveals the underworld of harlots where love is replaced by lust. With Natcha beside him, the protagonist is satisfied with the epicurean world:

Natcha, offering love,  
For ten shillings offering love.  
Offering: A night with me, honey.  
A love, sweet night with me. Come, drink palm wine,  
Come, drink kisses.  
A long dream night with me. (Rampersad 98)

Cullen's "Portrait of a lover" and Hughes' "Black Pierrot" stress a fundamental difference between the two poets' concept of a lover. The former portrays a romantic sketch of a lover who undergoes an excruciating ordeal. On the other hand, the latter highlights the problem of racial love since the protagonist experienced unrequited love because of his colour. Unlike the romantic portrait in Cullen's poem, Hughes' "A Black Pierrot" provides a sketch of an everyday man who suffers from racism, even in love. It is a three stanza poem which makes it clear that blackness is set as a barrier between Afro-Americans and also inter-racial love:

I am a black Pierrot:  
She did not love me,  
So I crept away into the night  
And the night was black, too. (Rampersad 31)

The antithesis implied in the very title of the poem reveals the protagonist's racial awareness. Pierrot, who is a music clown with a painted white face is, black. The exposition of the problem of the inter-racial love is revealed in the last two form of an image of a twofold evil, one of segregation set by a racist and the other of Afro-American's self imposed seclusion, also forced on him because he is shunned.

The second stanza presents the nature of his suffering. He spends the night chanting a dirge because of his deprivation:

I am a black Pierrot:  
She did not love me,  
So I crept away into the dawn  
Dripped bloodover the eastern hills  
And my heart was bleeding, too. (Rampersad 31)

The third stanza contains the recapitulation and the solution of the problem. The protagonist deems it suitable to direct his passions to ethnic channels of racial love:

I am a black Pierrot:  
She did not love me,  
So with my once gay colored soul  
Shrunken like a balloon without air,  
I went forth in the morning  
To seek a new brown love. (Rampersad 31)

Love and death mingle, as in Cullen's "One Day We Played a Game" and "Variation on a Theme". The same theme is dealt with in Hughes' "Monroe's Blues" and "Lament over Love", but from a different angle. "One Day We Played a Game" traces the origins of love to lovers long dead, till one goes back to the story of Adam and Eve and the Fall of Man. "Variation on a Theme" shows that Cullen's treatment of love is deftly interlaced with death in this poem, he weaves the loss of love with its presence. To this effect, Shucard writes:

Even in "Variation On a Theme"...when Cullen separates the concept of love from death as far as to conclude that loss of Love is worse than death, paradoxically he cannot entirely divorce the two: he describes the loss of love in terms of death, finding that his hands are slack and his blood cold, and wondering that his heart still beats. (60)

Hughes' "Laments over Love" reveals the psychologically devastating effects the loss of love has. This is a four stanza poem which assumes the repetitive nature of blue poems. The protagonist satisfactorily sacrifices life as long as it is devoid of love. The poem hints at the injustice done to the Afro-American woman with regard to love relationships:

I hope my child'll  
Never love a man.  
I say I hope my child'll  
Never love a man.  
Love can hurt you  
Mo'n anything else can. (Rampersad 69)

The two poets offer two vegetative images of death: Cullen's "Leaves" and Hughes' "Little Green Tree". Opening couplet of the poem "Leaves" shows how easily death occurs:

One, two, and three,  
Dead leaves drift from a tree. (Jackson 108)

The image of a tree as life and of withered leaves dead people enhances the cyclical movement of creation. The final couplet contains man's wish to alter this cyclical order. Hughes' "Little Green Tree" traces man's life from cradle to the grave. The tree is seen as the eternal place where the dead rest quietly forever. It is a symbol of Mother Nature. The sway of death is introduced in the first stanza:

It looks like to me  
My good-time days done past.  
Nothin' in the world  
Is due to last. (Rampersad 313)

The protagonist evaluates his life and reaches the conclusion that death ends everything. The second stanza is a flashback of the protagonist's life. He has become wise with old age. The third stanza portrays an image of the protagonist's life span and his recognition of death:

I look down the road  
And I see a little tree,  
A little piece down the road.  
I see a little tree. (Rampersad 313)

Life at large, is depicted as a road, and the protagonist is a passerby. On the other hand, locating "a little piece" personalizes the experience and refers to private life of the protagonist. "Little Tree" metaphorically represents the grave where the weary soul will finally rest.

Hughes' and Cullen's thoughts of death are colored by their philosophies of self acceptance and self dejection. Cullen's "Two Thoughts of Death" builds up a despondent atmosphere where death is seen as the only alternative to the struggle of life. In the first part, the protagonist points out the dominance of death:

When I am dead, it will not be  
Much matter of concern to me  
Who folds by hands, or combs my hair,  
Or, pitying their sightless stare,  
Draws down the blinds across my eyes. (Jackson 86)

The hopelessness of the protagonist is introduced in these lines. He highlights the most important fact for him when he says, "When I am Dead". This fact overshadows everything else. It reveals to what extent death controls the protagonist. Similarly, sleep as synonymous with death, recurs in Hughes' poems. In "Young Bride" death is portrayed as calm sleep. It stands in contrast with the burden of life and pain of love. The poet states the fact of death in a way which shows how death can console: the cyclical movement of life and death is referred to, to death's great advantage in the poem. The death experience of the protagonist is depicted in a bloody image where death is personified as a cruel reaper, a cut-throat. The minute description of this experience creates a horrifying atmosphere. The heartless reaper picks a flower which symbolizes the protagonist's soul. Cullen concludes the poem with a water image which establishes death as a source of wisdom, a stage at which the protagonist is endowed with revelation.

Hughes' philosophy of self acceptance is presented in "Fantasy in Purple" which shows death in so light hearted a manner that it belittles its catastrophic effects:

Beat the drums of tragedy for me.  
Beat the drums of tragedy and death.  
And let the choir sing a stormy song  
To drown the rattle of my dying breath. (Rampersad 56)

In Hughes's poetry, love is rarely insulated from racial reality. "Song for a Dark Girl" reveals how lynching annihilates intimate bonds. Death invades private emotion, reflecting structural violence. Steven Tracy emphasizes that Hughes's blues aesthetics convert grief into communal resilience (Tracy 3). This transformation of sorrow into song becomes an act of identity preservation. Thus, even when love is destroyed, the poetic voice asserts dignity. Death in Hughes functions as testimony where lynching reveals national hypocrisy. Robert Bone observes that Hughes exposes contradictions within American democracy (Bone 140).

Houston A. Baker Jr. identifies Hughes's poetic method as a "blues matrix" capable of transforming fragmentation into expressive power (Baker 72). Death becomes not silence but articulation. In contrast, Cullen's poetry often internalizes trauma. In "Incident," a racial slur erases childhood innocence. Harold Bloom remarks that Cullen's controlled form intensifies emotional suppression (Bloom, Countee Cullen 15). Love, in Cullen, frequently appears as longing—for ancestral roots, for divine justice, for existential coherence.

In "Yet Do I Marvel," Cullen questions divine purpose. Fanon's theory of racial self-awareness clarifies this anguish: racialized identity becomes an imposed burden (Fanon 116). Cultural Displacement and Heritage. "What is Africa to me?"—this refrain in "Heritage" articulates divided lineage. Werner Sollors' concept of "consent and descent" explains the tension between inherited ancestry and chosen cultural affiliation (Sollors 6)

## CONCLUSION

The poetry of Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen demonstrates that identity under Jim Crow was neither stable nor singular. Through love and death, both poets articulate the psychic consequences of racial oppression. Hughes' and Cullen's poems discussed that love and death are the only alternatives to abortive attempts at protest under Jim Crow society. They use vegetative images to express their concepts of love and death. Both poets stress the improbability of love surviving in deplorable conditions. The mingling of love and death in their poems reveals a tormented psyche torn between hope and despair. Hughes transforms collective suffering into cultural affirmation. Cullen reveals spiritual doubt and psychological division. Together, they represent complementary strategies of resistance—one communal and outward-facing, the other introspective and existential. Schultz contends that racial consciousness in Harlem Renaissance poetry functioned as both aesthetic strategy and political intervention (Schultz 6). Thus, love and death are not abstract motifs but historically grounded experiences. Recent scholarship confirms that Harlem Renaissance writers were actively engaged in redefining Black identity within a hostile social order (Jindal 2; Yusuf 12). Their poetry remains a vital testament to how artistic expression contests erasure and reclaims humanity.

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