

Two Poems by Countee Cullen (1903-1946)

Incident

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.

1) Response Prompt – A Recurring Motif

Every poem—and every short story, for that matter—has what we might call a *focus*, a *dramatic situation* or, as poet Mark Strand once put it, an *occasion for being*. This poem's focus is a remembered experience.

- **What does the remembered experience portrayed in this poem have in common with the remembered experiences in the early part of *Great Expectations* (i.e., Stage 1 of Pip's Expectations)? What sort of experience, as well as the impact of this experience on their sense of self, do both the poem's speaker and young Pip have in common?**
- **Also, recall the autobiographical narrative by Alice Walker, "Beauty: When the Other Dancer Is the Self." Remember how Walker portrays both her physical wounding and the wounds inflicted on her sense of self, how she lost not only her physical sight in one eye, but lost her childhood view of herself as "beautiful and whole and free." What interesting parallels—both similarities and differences—do you see among these three narrators: the speaker of "Incident," Pip, and Alice Walker?**

For A Lady I Know

She even thinks that up in heaven
Her class lies late and snores

While poor black cherubs rise at seven
To do celestial chores.

2) Response Prompt – Social Commentary & Satire

The term **social commentary** identifies ways in which a writer addresses and comments upon the values, beliefs, and customs of the dominant society. A writer may support and advocate the values, beliefs, and customs of the dominant society; OR a writer may protest against these values, beliefs, and customs; OR a writer may call into question these values, beliefs, and customs without clearly advocating or criticizing them. One important type of social commentary is known as **satire**—a subgenre in which consists a writer exposes either the foolishness (i.e., stupidity) or the vice (i.e., moral depravity or wickedness) of people and society so that these errors can be recognized and corrected. Finally, one important element of satire—and the main reason why audience members can often miss the author's satirical intention—is the use of **irony**. The satirist often makes his or her social commentary through indirection, or through the meaningful contrast/discrepancy between appearance and reality or between expectation and outcome.

- **How does this brief poem make social commentary? As a satire, what is the essential criticism that this poem makes about its subject? (What important human quality does this character lack, or what foolish or evil quality does this character display but not recognize in herself?)**