

# Tableau



## POEM TEXT

- 1 Locked arm in arm they cross the way,
- 2 The black boy and the white,
- 3 The golden splendor of the day,
- 4 The sable pride of night.
  
- 5 From lowered blinds the dark folk stare,
- 6 And here the fair folk talk,
- 7 Indignant that these two should dare
- 8 In unison to walk.
  
- 9 Oblivious to look and word
- 10 They pass, and see no wonder
- 11 That lightning brilliant as a sword
- 12 Should blaze the path of thunder.



## SUMMARY

A young Black man and a young white man cross the street, walking arm in arm. The young white man looks as gloriously golden as the daytime; the young Black man looks as gloriously dark as the nighttime.

Black members of the community stare at them from behind lowered window-blinds, while white members of the community talk about them. Both groups are outraged that these two young men have dared to walk together.

The young men walk by without noticing these hostile looks and words. They're not surprised that their fiery, powerful feelings for each other should clear people out of their way, like lightning followed by thunder.



## THEMES



### LOVE VS. PREJUDICE

Countee Cullen's "Tableau" celebrates interracial, same-sex love in the face of widespread prejudice.

Written in 1920s America, an era of pervasive racism and homophobia, the poem depicts two young men—one Black and one white—proudly walking “arm in arm” as their community stares and whispers disapprovingly. But the men don't budge: in fact, the poem compares their open display of affection to “lightning brilliant as a sword,” which clears the way before

them like “thunder.” The poem's brief *tableau*, or scene, shows how brazen rejection of a taboo can be powerfully disruptive, turning fear and shame back on the disapproving community.

The poem portrays the young men's intimacy as something perfectly natural, displayed boldly to a community that considers it unnatural. The “black boy and the white” walk “arm in arm” on the street, demonstrating a close, probably romantic bond.

Most of their society (and Cullen's) would have seen this bond as doubly taboo: the couple aren't just both men, they're interracial. Yet the poet compares the young men, in glowing terms, to the most basic pairing in nature: “The golden splendor of the day, / The sable pride of night.” The poem thus frames their relationship as both natural and glorious.

Though the surrounding community is outraged, it doesn't confront the young men; in fact, it seems unnerved by their frank exhibition of forbidden intimacy and unsure what to do in the face of such brazen rule-breaking. Their Black neighbors stare at the young pair “From lowered blinds,” as if wanting to see them without being seen. Meanwhile, white neighbors “talk” about them but don't talk to them or harm them, at least at this moment. Though the community is “Indignant” that the young men “dare” walk arm in arm, it doesn't “dare” anything on behalf of the values it's supposedly worked up over. There's something furtive, uncertain, and even embarrassed about its hostile response.

Ultimately, then, these proud young men exercise a strange kind of power. The poem compares their intimacy to “lightning” and “thunder”: feared and avoided, but fearless and natural, and perhaps even transformative. The young men are “Oblivious to look and word”; they don't notice or care about their neighbors' reactions, and they “pass” without experiencing any direct harassment. They “see no wonder” in the fact that others stay out of their way. They *themselves* consider their bond as powerful and natural as a thunderstorm—even intimidating, like a “sword”—and seem unsurprised that they're able to display it to the world. In fact, it's *because* they're unabashed that their love is so powerful; it may even signal that social change is brewing, the way lightning signals a change of weather.

The poem was written during a time when even close interracial friendships were frowned on and dangerous in most of the U.S. Its implication that these young men are lovers makes their public intimacy—and the poem itself—even riskier. Yet “Tableau” is as bold in depicting this intimacy as the couple is in displaying it. Cullen, a Black man, eventually dedicated the poem to someone believed to have been a white male lover, making it a tribute that embodies the pride it portrays.

**Where this theme appears in the poem:**

- Lines 1-12

**LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS****LINES 1-2**

*Locked arm in arm they cross the way,  
The black boy and the white,*

The poem sets its scene (establishes its "Tableau") with the image of two young men crossing a street together. One is "black," the other is "white," and they are "Locked arm in arm." The street might be in any town or city, but the casual term "the way" (as in a phrase like "just down the way") makes it sound like part of a familiar neighborhood. Perhaps this setting is familiar to one or both young men, or to the speaker describing the scene.

"Tableau" was published in the U.S. in 1925, during an era of extreme and institutionalized racism and homophobia. For example, Jim Crow segregation laws were still in effect throughout much of the country and would be for several more decades. In that context, the public display of affection described here would have seemed dramatic and provocative, both for the community in the poem and for readers of the poem. The young men's display of interracial, same-sex affection openly defies taboo. (Some readers in 1925 would have read their affection as homoerotic, while others would have read it as "just friendship," but all American readers would have understood that it violated social codes surrounding race.)

The poem is written in [common meter](#), meaning that it alternates between lines of [iambic tetrameter](#) (eight syllables following an unstressed-stressed or "da-DUM, da-DUM" rhythm) and iambic trimeter (six syllables following the same rhythm). However, in lines 1-2, there are two significant variations in this pattern:

Locked arm | in arm | they cross | the way,  
The black | boy and | the white,

The first metrical foot of line 1 is a [spondee](#) (stressed-stressed) rather than an iamb (unstressed-stressed), while the second foot of line 2 is a [trochee](#) (stressed-unstressed) rather than an iamb. The result is that both "Locked" and "boy" are stressed where they normally wouldn't be.

The stress on "Locked" emphasizes how intimate and tightly linked this pair is. The stress on "boy" ensures that both syllables of "black boy" are emphasized, contrasting this phrase sharply with "white" (also a stressed syllable). The [alliteration](#) of "black boy" and "way"/"white" further emphasizes the words "black" and "white." These emphases signal that race (both

racial division and cross-racial bonding) will be a central theme of the poem.

**LINES 3-4**

*The golden splendor of the day,  
The sable pride of night.*

Lines 3-4 use a mildly [hyperbolic](#), celebratory [metaphor](#) to describe the two young men. The speaker compares the white and Black youth, respectively, to "The golden splendor of the day" and "The sable pride of night." Here, "splendor" means "glory," while "sable" means "black" (*sable* can also refer to a luxurious black fur, or the small animal it comes from).

This comparison gestures toward the young men's racial differences—one young man has light skin (and perhaps "golden" blond hair); the other has dark skin and hair—while implying that they're two halves of a unified whole, like the daytime and the nighttime. It also suggests that their bond is *natural* rather than unnatural, even though their community might see it otherwise. Finally, the words "golden," "splendor," "sable," and "pride" [connote](#) riches, glory, beauty, and dignity. No matter how the community sees this relationship, the pair themselves—and the speaker—view it as something to be proud of.

Notice how lines 2-4 all begin with "The": an example of [anaphora](#), or [repetition](#) of words at the beginning of lines. Lines 3-4 also contain [parallel](#) phrasing ("The \_\_\_ of \_\_\_"). These repetitions help establish a steady rhythm for the poem, heightening the musicality of its [ballad](#) form. Another sonic effect, [assonance](#), links "day"/"sable" and "pride"/"night," making these lines of praise more [euphonious](#) (pleasurable to hear).

**LINES 5-8**

*From lowered blinds the dark folk stare,  
And here the fair folk talk,  
Indignant that these two should dare  
In unison to walk.*

The second [stanza](#) portrays the reaction of neighbors and bystanders/passersby to the young men walking arm in arm. Again the speaker points out a racial distinction, noting that the "dark folk" (Black people) "stare" at the young men from behind "lowered blinds," while the "fair folk" (white people) "talk" about them. The distinction reflects a segregated social landscape, but it also shows a *similarity* between the "dark" and "fair" folk, in that both are paying close and apparently hostile attention to the young men flouting the social code.

Interestingly, this sentence contains some grammatical ambiguity: it could be taken to mean that *both* the "dark folk" and "fair folk" are "Indignant," or that *just* the fair folk are. Technically, "Indignant" could modify "fair folk" only, although the general context suggests that it's probably meant to modify both.

In any case, the distinction between staring from behind lowered window blinds and indignantly talking in the street also suggests other subtle differences. This may be a predominantly Black neighborhood, for example, but the white people in the vicinity seem more apt to voice their indignation. In other words, they're more vocal about upholding the racist status quo these two young men are flouting. By contrast, the Black residents are curious, perhaps even suspicious or hostile, but they don't seem to be vocalizing any outrage.

The [alliteration](#) in "fair folk," combined with the /k/ [consonance](#) in "dark folk" and "folk talk," again places extra emphasis on phrases describing racial difference. (Lines 1-2 contained a similar effect.) The /d/ consonance in "Indignant" and "dare" gives line 7 a hard, sputtering, indignant sound, while the assonance bridging "two" and "unison" is a subtle way of emphasizing how these two "boy[s]" have become *one* well-matched pair.

Finally, the inverted syntax (word order) of "In unison to walk"—the normal word order would be "To walk in unison"—both sets up the "talk"/"walk" rhyme and draws extra attention to the couple's *unison*. Though this stanza describes division, its final emphasis is on connection.

## LINES 9-12

*Oblivious to look and word  
They pass, and see no wonder  
That lightning brilliant as a sword  
Should blaze the path of thunder.*

The poem ends with a complex [metaphor](#), again drawn from the natural world (as if to emphasize the naturalness of this relationship). The young men "pass" by the indignant people around them, "Oblivious to" (not noticing) the hostile "look[s] and word[s]" they're receiving. They "see no wonder" (that is, they don't find it surprising) that:

[...] lightning brilliant as a sword  
Should blaze the path of thunder.

The speaker drops this metaphor without further explanation, so it takes a little unpacking. The "lightning" apparently refers to the passion between the young men and/or the electrifying, powerful effect of their presence. (Lightning is often associated with romantic sizzle, as well as with natural or divine power.)

It's "brilliant as a sword," meaning that it's so dazzling that it seems intimidating (or impressive, or threatening) to others around them. In a sense, the sheer "dar[ing]" (line 7) of their taboo-breaking behavior may be acting as a kind of protective weapon, guarding them against harassment. The "lightning" also "blaze[s] the path of thunder"—that is, clears the way before them, like a thunderclap frightening people off.

In a sense, this metaphor may be turning a negative into a

positive: the prejudiced community seems to be avoiding and ostracizing this couple. But to the couple (and the speaker), their isolation is a badge of power and pride. Their haters are standing back because they don't know how to deal with them—in fact, they're a little scared of them.

There's possibly an ironic [pun](#) on "pass" in line 10. In American slang, this word is sometimes used to describe light-skinned people of color who can "pass for" (be perceived as) white, gay people who can "pass for" straight, etc. However, this couple doesn't seem to be "passing" in that sense at all. Rather than blending in with a majority, they're highly visible and drawing hostile attention from the people around them.

This final stanza contains the poem's only [slant rhyme](#): "sword"/"word." All the other rhymes are full, or perfect, rhymes. However, even "sword" and "word" are closely matched—in fact, they're just one letter apart! The tight, interlocking ABAB [rhyme scheme](#) suits the poem's subject: a well-matched pair "Locked arm in arm." Strong [alliteration](#) connects their "brilliant," lightning-like passion with its powerful "blaze." Along with the /p/ in "path," these percussive /b/ sounds also evoke the percussion of thunder.



## SYMBOLS



### DAY AND NIGHT

The speaker compares the two young men to "The golden splendor of the day, / The sable pride of night." On one level, this is a [metaphor](#) about skin color; one young man is "white" and perhaps fair-haired or "golden"-haired, while the other is "black" or "sable," i.e., dark-skinned and dark-haired. But [symbolically](#), day and night are also associated with nature and time—or *timelessness*, in that day and night always follow each other.

This language suggests that there's something natural and timeless about the intimacy between these two young men. Along with the nouns "splendor" and "pride," the symbolism becomes another way of validating and celebrating the bond they share. Their community may consider that bond unnatural, but the speaker considers it an ordinary, beautiful feature of the world, like day and night themselves.

#### Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "The golden splendor of the day, / The sable pride of night."



### LIGHTNING AND THUNDER

At the end of the poem, lightning and thunder become a complex [symbol](#) for the passion between the two young men, as well as its effect on the surrounding

community.

Lightning and thunder are familiar, ancient symbols for romantic passion. (In French, for example, the term "coup de foudre" means both a lightning bolt and love at first sight.) The poem's use of these symbols might be its clearest hint that these two young men are "more than just friends"—though a close interracial friendship would have been scandalous enough during this time period. The poem even presents the symbols without context or explanation, trusting the reader to infer that "lightning" refers to the electrifying feelings they share and display.

This lightning is also compared to a "sword" that "blaze[s] the path of thunder." Symbolically, this suggests that their passion has a startling, and even fearsome, impact on people around them. It outrages their prejudiced community, but they display it so proudly and openly that the community doesn't quite know how to respond. They stay out of the young men's way, as if driven back by a lightning bolt or thunderclap.

Finally, lightning and thunder (like "day" and "night" in lines 3-4) are *natural* phenomena—another way in which the poem hints that this passion is natural, rather than unnatural or sinful.

#### Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 11-12:** "That lightning brilliant as a sword / Should blaze the path of thunder."



## POETIC DEVICES

### ANTITHESIS

The poem uses [antithesis](#) to underline differences—especially racial differences—in the community it portrays.

For example, the speaker describes one of the two young men as "white" and "golden" like the "day," the other as "black" and "sable" like the "night." (*Sable* is a kind of luxurious, dark fur as well as a synonym for *black*.) The speaker also contrasts "the dark folk" who "stare" at the young men from surrounding windows with "the fair folk" who "talk" about them as bystanders.

These details suggest a neighborhood whose residents are predominantly Black—a reflection of Cullen's highly segregated America—but whose streets contain people of different races going about their business (or spying on other people's business). That the Black observers simply "stare" while the white observers "talk" may suggest that the latter are more vocal, more proactive, about enforcing racial boundaries. This contrast appears again in the phrase "look and word" in line 9.

In a way, the poem also sets up an antithesis between difference and similarity! For example, the two young men are of different races—but they're both young men. They're

"Locked arm in arm" and "walking in unison": phrases that [connote](#) similarity and harmony. (If they're lovers, however, they face discrimination due to another socially defined distinction: straight vs. gay.)

Likewise, the "dark folk" and "fair folk" have contrasting skin tones and react somewhat differently to the young couple—yet they seem united in their suspicion of that couple. That is, they both seem to uphold, or at least act in accordance with, a social code that treats race as a fundamental source of division.

#### Where Antithesis appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-6:** "The black boy and the white, / The golden splendor of the day, / The sable pride of night. / From lowered blinds the dark folk stare, / And here the fair folk talk,"
- **Line 9:** "look and word"

### JUXTAPOSITION

The poem is presented as a "Tableau," or striking scene. That scene [juxtaposes](#) two young men—"the black boy and the white"—with the surrounding community that reacts "Indignant[ly]" to their affection for each other.

The poem lays the scene out neatly, with the speaker acting as a kind of guide:

- The first stanza describes the young men crossing the street arm in arm.
- The second stanza then shows the community's response to this, describing first the "dark folk" (Black people) and then the "fair folk" (white people)—thereby highlighting the racial division that has caused their indignation. ([Ironically](#), it also suggests that indignation *unites* the "dark" and "fair folk.")
- The third stanza returns to the young couple, who "pass" without noticing the hostility. In this way, the young men's affection seems to have the first and last word; it begins and ends the poem, with the hostility a relatively trivial detail in the middle.

Overall, the juxtaposition contrasts the young men's happiness, beauty, and pride with the pettiness, prejudice, and anger of the "folk" surrounding them. By the end, the couple seems almost to exist on a higher plane than their community; their powerful presence acts like "lightning" and "thunder," keeping haters out of their way.

#### Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12

## REPETITION

"Tableau" is a poem about similarity and difference, and it uses several forms of [repetition](#) to highlight these themes.

First, there's the simple repetition of words such as "arm" in line 1 and "folk" in lines 5-6. The repetitive phrase "arm in arm" introduces the two young men—whose races will soon be contrasted—with an image of similarity and unity. The repeated use of "folk" to describe the surrounding neighbors and bystanders may also hint at an underlying unity. True, some of these "folk" are white and others Black, and one group is "star[ing]" while the other "talk[s]." But they're part of the same community, and they're all watching the young men closely. Though the grammar of the passage is ambiguous, it seems likely that both groups, not just the "fair folk," are "Indignant" at what they're seeing.

There's also some [anaphora](#) in lines 2-4, all of which begin with the word "The." This [parallel](#) phrasing has the effect of introducing the young men in one way, then reintroducing them in another, more elevated way. First they're simply a "black boy and [a] white," then they're the splendors of night and day!

Finally, the use of multiple, contrasting words meaning *dark* and *light*—"black" and "white"; "sable" and "golden"; "dark" and "fair"—is a subtle form of repetition. Again, this effect drives home the centrality of race in the poem.

### Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "arm," "arm"
- **Line 2:** "The," "black," "white"
- **Line 3:** "The," "golden"
- **Line 4:** "The," "sable"
- **Line 5:** "dark," "folk"
- **Line 6:** "fair," "folk"

## PARALLELISM

Along with other forms of [repetition](#), [parallelism](#) helps highlight the similarities and differences that are central to the poem's meaning.

The parallel phrasing of "The black boy and the white" in line 2, for example, highlights the racial contrast between the "boy[s]." The following two lines, also set in grammatical parallel, then elevate that contrast to something beautiful. (The "day"/"night" [metaphor](#) also highlights the *unity* between the "boy[s]," since day and night are two halves of one whole.)

The parallel phrases "the dark folk stare" and "the fair folk talk" (lines 5-6) underscore both difference and similarity. The "dark" and "fair" (Black and white) community members react slightly differently to the sight of the young couple: one group "stare[s]" while the other "talk[s]." But they're all ordinary "folk," and they all react with extreme interest.

### Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-4:** "The black boy and the white, / The golden splendor of the day, / The sable pride of night."
- **Line 5:** "the dark folk stare"
- **Line 6:** "the fair folk talk"

## ALLITERATION

[Alliteration](#) and [consonance](#) add emphasis at a few key moments in the poem. For example, the /b/ alliteration in "black boy" (line 2) and the /w/ alliteration in "way"/"white" (line 3) helps emphasize the contrasting words "black" and "white," establishing the poem's theme of racial difference.

In lines 5-6, the /f/ sounds in "fair folk" (meaning white people), along with the /k/ consonance in "dark folk" (meaning Black people) and "folk talk," have much the same effect. Through its sound devices, the poem places racial divisions at the front of the reader's mind, conveying their importance in this prejudiced community. The reader can't ignore them any more than the community can—even if the young men appear "Oblivious" to the racism they face.

In line 7, /d/ consonance ("Indignant," "dare") creates a hard, forceful sound, as if mimicking the community's sputtering indignation. In lines 11-12, /b/ alliteration links two thematically related words ("brilliant" and "blaze" both convey the fieriness of the "lightning"), while creating a percussive sound that mimics "thunder."

### Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "way"
- **Line 2:** "black boy," "white"
- **Line 3:** "splendor"
- **Line 4:** "sable"
- **Line 6:** "fair folk"
- **Line 7:** "that these"
- **Line 11:** "brilliant"
- **Line 12:** "blaze"

## ASSONANCE

[Assonance](#) and [internal rhyme](#) are sprinkled throughout the poem. In the first stanza, for example, there's an internal rhyme between "they" and "way" (line 1), a shared long /a/ vowel in "day" and "sable" (lines 3-4), and a shared long /i/ vowel in "pride" and "night" (line 4). The second stanza contains long /o/ assonance in "lowered"/"folk"/"folk," as well as long /u/ assonance in "two" and "unison."

In general, these sound effects add musicality and rhythmic emphasis to this short [ballad](#) (a form rooted in the song tradition). In some cases, they also contribute to the poem's meaning. For example, the rhyme on "they"/"way" links the two young men with the street they're crossing, almost as if to

suggest the way belongs to *them*. (By the end of the poem, they seem to have cleared a "path" before them.)

The "day"/"sable" assonance links two words associated with light and dark, in a stanza about bridging differences and crossing racial barriers. Similarly, the shared /u/ sound in "two" and "unison" helps underscore the theme of connection and harmony—two becoming one.

#### Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "they," "way"
- **Line 3:** "day"
- **Line 4:** "sable," "pride," "night"
- **Line 5:** "lowered," "folk"
- **Line 6:** "folk"
- **Line 7:** "two"
- **Line 8:** "unison"

## METAPHOR

The poem describes its central duo using [metaphors](#) based in the natural world. In the first stanza, it calls them:

The golden splendor of the day,  
The sable pride of night.

On the most basic level, this refers to their separate races; one "boy" is fair-skinned and perhaps fair-haired ("golden" blond); the other is dark-skinned and dark-haired. In a sense, then, they look like day and night, light and darkness, combined. The metaphor is also full of celebratory praise—"splendor," "pride"—and uses an [image](#) that highlights *unity* as much as contrast, since day and night follow each other and are halves of the same timeless whole.

The final stanza compares the young men's effect on the community around them to a thunderstorm. The speaker says they are not surprised:

That lightning brilliant as a sword  
Should blaze the path of thunder.

In other words, their chemistry or passion is dazzling, electrifying, like a bolt of "lightning"—which itself is like a "sword" (there's a [simile](#) folded into this metaphor). It's "no wonder" (line 10) that people avoid them, as if thunder has cleared their "path"!

Notice that this metaphor turns a potentially sad image of ostracism and isolation into an image of power and pride. The community may be avoiding them out of sheer hostility, and may even pose a danger to them, but from their point of view, the way is clear before them because they're startlingly powerful. (That "sword" of "lightning" even hints at a kind of divine power.)

By drawing on nature, these metaphors also imply that the bond between the young men is entirely natural, even if their society considers it unnatural.

#### Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "The golden splendor of the day, / The sable pride of night."
- **Lines 11-12:** "That lightning brilliant as a sword / Should blaze the path of thunder."

## HYPERBOLE

The poem describes the two young men ("The black boy and the white") in [hyperbolic](#) terms. The first stanza associates them with the beauty of daytime and nighttime: "The golden splendor of the day, / The sable pride of night." This is a [metaphor](#) for their contrasting physical appearance (fair-skinned/fair-haired vs. dark-skinned/dark-haired), but it's also a grand way of saying that they look proud and beautiful as they walk together.

Later, the final stanza compares their impact on bystanders to "lightning brilliant as a sword," which "blaze[s] the path of thunder" as they walk past. This hyperbole suggests that they have a striking chemistry—an "electrifying" presence—that startles and even intimidates their prejudiced community.

The poem's hyperbolic language is part of its celebration of love in the face of prejudice. It makes the young men seem elevated and grand compared to the pettiness of their haters. It also associates their relationship with the power of nature itself: day, night, thunder, lightning.

This is important because the prejudices of the period (the poem reflects the U.S. in the 1920s) considered both interracial and same-sex relationships "unnatural"—sinful, disgraceful, and worthy of punishment. Thus, the hyperbole makes a proud statement: it glorifies and validates forms of love that Cullen's society minimized and shamed.

#### Where Hyperbole appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "The golden splendor of the day, / The sable pride of night."
- **Lines 11-12:** "That lightning brilliant as a sword / Should blaze the path of thunder."

## PUN

"Tableau" contains several possible [puns](#), all of them subtle.

When the young men "cross the way" in line 1, for example, they're literally walking across the street, but the phrase seems to echo other meanings of "cross" as well. This is a "cross-racial" pair (a Black youth and a white youth), "crossing" (breaching) racial boundaries by walking together and displaying their affection. In the process, they are judged to be "crossing"

(defiantly confronting) the community, as in the phrase "Don't cross me," and they make bystanders "cross" (angry).

There may even be the suggestion of the Christian cross: their community scorns and isolates them, making them somewhat like Christian martyrs, and the description "lightning brilliant as a sword" (line 11) lends their presence a kind of divine aura. (It may [allude](#) to the flaming sword in the Book of Genesis and/or the line "[God] has loosed the fateful lightning of his terrible swift sword," from the Civil War-era poem "[The Battle Hymn of the Republic](#).")

The word "fair" in line 6 means "fair-skinned" (white), but there may also be an [ironic](#) pun on the usual meaning of "fair": honest, even-handed, etc. The white people indignantly criticizing the two young men aren't being fair to them at all!

Finally, "pass" in line 10 might pun on the idea of "passing" in terms of one's race or sexual orientation. In racist and homophobic cultures, people of color and queer people who can "pass for" (be perceived as) white or heterosexual have historically avoided some forms of discrimination. Again, this pun seems ironic in context: the poem's interracial, same-sex couple is highly visible—in fact, being stared at—and faces prejudice as a result.

#### Where Pun appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "cross"
- **Line 6:** "fair"
- **Line 10:** "pass"



## FORM, METER, & RHYME

### FORM

"Tableau" is made up of three [quatrains](#), or four-line stanzas. More specifically, these are [ballad](#) stanzas: they follow an ABAB [rhyme scheme](#) and use [common meter](#) (more on what that means in the "Meter" section of this guide.)

The ballad form dates back to the Middle Ages. It's often used to tell stories, as it is in this poem. Ballads are often linked with romantic stories in particular—a tradition "Tableau" draws on, since it's clearly about intimacy and likely about love.

The fact that the poem is a ballad elevates its characters. Its central couple shares an intimacy that their "Indignant" community finds disgraceful, yet their display of affection is described using an established, classic form.

### METER

"Tableau" is set in [common meter](#). This means that it alternates between lines of [iambic tetrameter](#) (lines with four iambs, metrical feet composed of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable) and lines of iambic trimeter (lines with three iambs, three da-DUMs). Listen to how this pattern plays out in lines 7-8, for example:

Indig- | nant that | these two | should dare  
In un- | ison | to walk.

The pattern includes some variations, which keep the rhythm from becoming too monotonous—and also create subtle moments of emphasis. The poem in fact begins with a [spondee](#) (a foot consisting of two stressed syllables in a row) before settling into an iambic rhythm ("Locked arm | in arm"). This subtly suggests how emphatically locked, or linked, together these two "boy[s]" are.

Common meter is associated with romantic ballads and hymns, and "Tableau" seems to draw on both traditions. In particular, its comparison of the young men's passion to a "blaz[ing]" "sword" of "lightning" has biblical overtones. In Genesis, for example, the Garden of Eden is guarded by a flaming sword after Adam and Eve's expulsion.

The "lightning" of God's "terrible swift sword" also appears in the famous 19th-century "[Battle Hymn of the Republic](#)" (though that hymn/poem is set in a different meter). By linking its form and [imagery](#) with the hymn tradition, "Tableau" might be aiming for irreverence—subversively celebrating a kind of love that the community in the poem considers sinful. Alternatively, it might be suggesting that there *is* something sacred or divinely powerful about this love. A mix of both is possible, too!



## VOCABULARY

**Tableau** () - "Tableau," the title of the poem, refers to a striking scene or arrangement of people, whether in real life or in a work of art.

**Splendor** (Line 3) - Glory, beauty, magnificence.

**Sable** (Line 4) - Black in color (like the fur of the animal of the same name).

**Fair** (Line 6) - Light-skinned, Caucasian (but with an ironic pun on "fair" as in "honest and just").

**Indignant** (Line 7) - Outraged, especially over something seen as wrong or immoral.

**Unison** (Line 8) - To do something in *unison* is to do it together at the same time.

**Oblivious** (Line 9) - Not aware of; not concerned about.

## RHYME SCHEME

The poem's three [stanzas](#) each follow this [rhyme scheme](#):

ABAB

In other words, in each [quatrain](#) line 1 rhymes with line 3 and line 2 rhymes with line 4. This simple scheme consists of snugly interlocking rhyme pairs, appropriate for a poem about a couple "Locked arm in arm."

Most of the rhymes in the poem are full rhymes, with one exception: "word" in line 9 and "sword" in line 11 form a [slant rhyme](#). However, even this rhyme seems like a close match, because despite their different vowel pronunciations, "word" and "sword" differ only by one letter! Visually, they're almost identical.

In general, the poem's rhymes make for "perfect" rather than "imperfect" pairs, echoing the way the "boy[s]" in the poem seem to be a perfect match for each other.

like "He lives just around the way." This is probably a residential neighborhood, since people are snooping "From lowered blinds"—something people would more naturally do from homes than, say, offices. Possibly this is a setting where people tend to know their neighbors, and where some of the "folk" staring at the couple know one or both of them personally.

There's also the implication that this is a primarily Black neighborhood, as the poem specifies that it's "dark folk" who stare from surrounding windows. This detail fits the highly segregated period of American life in which the poem was written. However, the scene also contains "fair folk" (white people) who stand around talking indignantly. This seems to be a reasonably busy street, where people of different backgrounds mingle to some extent—but where racism and homophobia predominate, and strict social codes govern many aspects of life.



## CONTEXT

### LITERARY CONTEXT

"Tableau" was first published in the magazine *Survey Graphic* in 1925 and collected later that year in Countee Cullen's debut volume, *Color*. Featuring such famous poems as "[Heritage](#)," "[Incident](#)," and "[Yet Do I Marvel](#)," *Color* was well received and is considered one of the foundational books of the Harlem Renaissance. It also put its author on the literary map at a young age: he was 22 and fresh out of college the year it was published!

As its title suggests, many of the poems in *Color* confront themes of race and racism, filtered through Cullen's experience as a Black American during the age of Jim Crow. "Incident," for example, concerns a childhood memory of being called a racial slur. "Yet Do I Marvel," which portrays its speaker's racial experience as a kind of divine punishment, famously concludes: "Yet do I marvel at this curious thing: / To make a poet black, and bid him sing!" Though "Tableau" also depicts the blunt reality of racism, it strikes a more affirmative note, describing an interracial friendship (and, implicitly, same-sex romance) in tones of celebration and pride.

With the success of *Color*, Cullen was hailed as a leader of the emerging arts and literary movement that came to be known as the Harlem Renaissance. Centered on New York City's Harlem neighborhood, the movement solidified a distinctively Black tradition within American arts and letters, celebrating Black life and culture while depicting and challenging American racism with unprecedented frankness. As the adopted son of a Harlem pastor, Cullen had lived in Harlem since adolescence and witnessed its rapid growth into a major, predominantly Black cultural center. He influenced and was influenced by many of the Renaissance's other luminaries, including fellow poets Claude McKay and Langston Hughes.



## SPEAKER

The speaker narrates the poem's scene (or "tableau") in the third person, but not as a detached and impartial observer. Instead, the speaker praises "the black boy and the white" in fairly [hyperbolic](#) terms, associating them with the "splendor of the day," the "pride of night," and the "brillian[cy]" of "lightning." Clearly, the speaker's attitude toward this intimate pair is one of pride and celebration.

Based on what's known of the poet's life, not only the speaker but also the young Black man in the poem may be stand-ins for Cullen himself. Cullen eventually dedicated "Tableau" to Donald Duff, a white former lover, suggesting that this portrait of queer interracial romance was inspired by his own experience. If so, the speaker would be narrating his experience in third rather than first-person—perhaps to show an outsider's perspective on it, or perhaps to distance himself from it slightly, during a time when both queer and interracial romance were very taboo topics. Regardless, the speaker's account seems to serve as a fond tribute as well as a social commentary.



## SETTING

The poem takes place on a street where two young men, a "black boy and [a] white," are walking "arm in arm." Surrounding community members (neighbors, strangers, or both) stare at the boys and discuss them "Indignant[ly]." This could be virtually any town or city in early 20th-century America, which discriminated against, generally prohibited, and often severely punished both queer and interracial relationships. Even close interracial friendships were essentially taboo.

The "way" the young men are crossing (line 1) could be any street, but "way" has a casual, neighborly ring to it, as in phrases



Like McKay, Cullen tended to avoid the experimental verse techniques of his Modernist contemporaries; he preferred to use traditional [meter](#), often in received forms such as the [sonnet](#) and [ballad](#). ("Tableau," for example, employs the [common meter](#) found in many ballads and hymns.) Although his first book remains arguably his most acclaimed, he remained an influential and highly regarded writer throughout his career.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The poem was published in 1925, decades before the U.S. Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. It also appeared long before the 1969 Stonewall riots that marked the beginning of the modern LGBTQ rights movement. In other words, it emerged into a culture of pervasive, institutionalized, and often violent racism and homophobia.

In 1920s America, Jim Crow laws maintained official racial segregation in the South, and most other areas of the country remained unofficially but heavily segregated as well. The Ku Klux Klan was resurgent and committing widespread acts of racist terrorism. Meanwhile, sex between same-sex partners was criminalized across the country. The first LGBTQ rights organization in America, the Society for Human Rights, didn't exist until 1924 (a year before "Tableau"), and it soon dissolved after some of its members were arrested. Interracial and same-sex romantic partners typically kept their relations secret, or partly secret, for fear of facing ostracism or violence.

In this climate, both the intimacy in the poem and the poem itself represented a bold statement. By "dar[ing] / In unison to walk," the "black boy and the white" not only spark the anger of their community but also potentially risk their own safety.

Meanwhile, Cullen risks outraging prejudiced readers—even as he deftly handles his provocative material by building some ambiguity into the poem. It's never stated outright that the two young men are lovers: they *could* just be friends (and in that highly segregated era, even interracial friendships were frowned upon). The poem clearly supports camaraderie and bonding across racial lines, but some readers in 1925 would have read the young men's bond as platonic. Others, however, would have seen strong hints of homoeroticism in the young men's behavior (walking "arm in arm" down the street; remaining "Oblivious" to others in the way couples often do).

Cullen himself is now generally understood to have had same-sex attractions and relationships, though these weren't a part of his public persona (he was twice married to women), and some details of his romantic life are still debated by scholars. "Tableau" didn't originally carry a dedication, but Cullen eventually dedicated it to Donald Duff, a white writer who may have been his lover, after Duff's death. Thus, the poem may be a

tribute to—and/or a product of—a real-life version of the love it portrays.



## MORE RESOURCES

### EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [Cullen's Life and Work](#) — Learn more about the author and his poems at the Poetry Foundation. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/countee-cullen>)
- [Cullen at the NYPL](#) — An exhibit on the Countee Cullen Branch of the New York Public Library, featuring context on "Tableau" and other poems, via the NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project. (<https://www.nyclgbtsites.org/site/countee-cullen-branch-new-york-public-library/>)
- [More on the Harlem Renaissance](#) — An introduction to the arts and literary movement known as the Harlem Renaissance, featuring additional Cullen poems. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/145704/an-introduction-to-the-harlem-renaissance>)
- [The Poet's Voice](#) — Listen to a recording of Cullen reading his poem "Heritage." (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UvN96fn5xTE>)
- [Cullen at the Smithsonian](#) — Check out an exhibit on Cullen at the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture. (<https://nmaahc.si.edu/LGBTQ/countee-cullen>)

### LITCHARTS ON OTHER COUNTEE CULLEN POEMS

- [From the Dark Tower](#)
- [Incident](#)
- [Yet Do I Marvel](#)



## HOW TO CITE

### MLA

Allen, Austin. "Tableau." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 23 Jul 2021. Web. 3 Aug 2021.

### CHICAGO MANUAL

Allen, Austin. "Tableau." LitCharts LLC, July 23, 2021. Retrieved August 3, 2021. <https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/countee-cullen/tableau>.