Yet Do I Marvel

SUMMARY

I have no doubt that God is virtuous, that he has good intentions, and that he's loving. I also have no doubt that if he were to lower himself enough to argue over something trivial, he could explain why the small mole burrowing through the dirt is unable to see, or why human beings who were modeled in God's image have to eventually die. I'm sure God could explain why Tantalus (a figure from Greek mythology punished with endless hunger and thirst) is taunted with fruit that's constantly just out of his reach, and I'm sure God could clarify whether it was just some cruel whim that doomed Sisyphus (another figure from Greek myth) to push a boulder uphill forever. God's ways are unknowable, and can't be comprehended by a human mind that's too full of trivial concerns to even begin to grasp the awe-inspiring motivations behind God's terrible actions. And still, I am filled with wonder and astonishment at the strange and unusual fact that God made a Black man (me) a poet, and then commanded him to sing!

THEMES

GOD AND HUMAN SUFFERING

The poem's speaker asks an ancient question: why does an all-powerful, loving God allow for so much suffering in the world? On the one hand, the speaker believes that God is inherently good and has a plan for everything. On the other hand, he can't help but wonder why God would allow human beings to struggle in ways that seem so never-ending and senseless. In the end, the speaker says that God's "ways" are simply "inscrutable," unknowable and beyond reproach—leaving the speaker to simply look on with amazement and confusion.

The speaker says he does not doubt that "God is good, well-meaning, kind." In other words, he knows God is not malicious (even if the extent of human suffering might sometimes suggest otherwise). He believes God has a plan for all, and that suffering is somehow accounted for within this plan. If God were to stop and explain himself, the speaker reasons, he would have an answer for everything. The fact that humans don't have access to these answers doesn't mean they don't exist.

At the same time, the speaker can't help but struggle to understand why an all-seeing and all-knowing God would allow human beings to suffer in such seemingly pointless ways. The speaker references struggles large and small—from the difficulty a sightless mole faces when tunneling through the earth to the anguish people feel when confronting mortality. Why would God make humans so similar to himself, the speaker wonders, and yet unlike himself in that they are doomed to a finite existence?

The speaker also refers to two figures from Greek myth, Tantalus and Sisyphus, who were condemned to eternal torture. These allusions suggest that the speaker has at least entertained the possibility that the Christian God is not so different from the gods of the Greek pantheon: that is, cruel, capricious, tormenting mortals just because they can. The speaker also seems to contradict his earlier stance on the goodness of God when he describes the "awful brain [that] compels [God's] awful hand." In other words, what kind of dreadful being would allow for such suffering in the world? But the word "awful" might also suggest the root word "awe," illustrating the speaker's sense of wonder and amazement at something that extends so far beyond his own "petty cares" and understanding.

Ultimately, the speaker's God is one who both inspires and baffles him. The speaker considers God's ways "inscrutable," again insinuating that everything must happen according to God's will, and if only God's plan was made clear, all would make sense. He "marvel[s]" at the fact that God would create him and "bid him sing" while also making him suffer. The speaker's awe and astonishment shows how he struggles to reconcile his belief that god is an all mighty loving being with the existence of so much suffering in the world. The poem doesn't solve this paradox, but rather suggests that people aren't meant to understand it. Human beings can only "marvel" at God's ways, which are too mysterious to fathom.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Lines 2-8
- Lines 9-12

THE DIFFICULTY OF BEING A BLACK POET

The poem doesn't just ask why a loving God allows for so much suffering, but why God would make the speaker both a poet and a Black person. The speaker finds this curious because a poet creates beauty—and yet this was a time when to be Black was to face immense hardship and prejudice. The speaker believes that God has called him to "sing"—that is, to write poems which rejoice in the beauty of the world. But he is also faced with a seemingly endless source of difficulty: the world's treatment of him as a Black man.

The speaker says he can't help but "marvel" at the "curious" fact

that God would create a Black poet. To understand why this would be "curious," consider the poem's context: Cullen lived in a time when there was intense prejudice against Black people. Black people were not expected to be educated or to make art, and though Cullen came of age during a time of Black intellectual and artistic revival (and would become one of the most famous poets of the Harlem Renaissance), he himself had very few Black poets to look up to.

The poem's allusions to Tantalus and Sisyphus—both classical figures doomed to eternal struggle—represent the speaker's own struggle living in a racist society. While he finds beauty and purpose in writing poetry, he is also painfully aware of the injustice and prejudice which make it almost impossible for a Black poet to "make it." In other words, he's been called to "sing": but to whom exactly is he meant to sing?

The speaker pits his race and his calling as a poet against each other in the final line of the poem, suggesting that there is no easy path for a Black person who is called to "sing." The "curious" nature of the speaker's predicament comes from this particular combination: it is difficult enough making one's way as a poet, but as a poet who is also Black? It seems the speaker is doomed to struggle against the conventions of poetry, conventions created by and for white people.

Despite the difficulty of being a Black poet in a time in which such a thing feels nearly impossible, the speaker also has a sense of purpose that renders his struggle meaningful. The speaker "marvels" at the uniqueness of his situation, a situation which he feels was chosen for him by God. If God made him Black and also "bid him sing," then there must be a reason for his struggles.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 5-8
- Lines 13-14

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINE 1

I doubt not ... good, well-meaning, kind,

"Yet Do I Marvel" deals with an ancient and difficult question: if God is inherently good, why does he let bad things happen?

In the opening line of the poem, the speaker establishes that he believes that the Christian God he worships is "good, well-meaning, kind." Yet the poem's title shows that no matter how much the speaker believes in the goodness of God, he is still left to "marvel" at God's ways, not quite able to make sense of them. From the start, this poem is expressing something more complicated than either "God is good" or "if God were good there wouldn't be suffering." Instead, it's trying to reconcile these two seemingly opposite ideas: that God is good, and that he allows humans to suffer terribly.

The asyndeton in this first line helps to establish the pace and direction of the poem. Without a coordinating conjunction between "well-meaning" and "kind," the poem doesn't linger too long on this opening statement, making it seem as if God's goodness is just something the speaker takes for granted. In other words, the poem isn't here to argue whether God is good and kind, but rather to explore the ways that God's inherent goodness may appear to be in conflict with the human suffering which he allows.

The alliteration in this first line also draws attention to the relationship between "God" and "good[ness]," while the poem's steady, regular iambic pentameter ("I doubt | not God | is good, | well-mean- | ing, kind") evokes the speaker's belief in God's guiding omnipotence. This tightly structured first line gives the reader a sense that the speaker knows where he is going: his faith and his poetry are both firm.

LINES 2-4

And did He ...
... some day die,

Having laid the foundation of the poem's argument in the first line (that "God is good, well-meaning, [and] kind"), the speaker moves on to his first real point: that if he wanted, God could explain the reason for suffering in the world. In other words, the speaker believes that human suffering doesn't happen in vain or because God is cruel or vindictive, but rather that people's inability to see the bigger picture makes their suffering seem senseless when it actually isn't.

The fact that God would have to "stoop" to explain the reasoning behind why things happen the way they do suggests that God is operating on a very different level than human beings, and that he has more important things to do than "quibble" with people who, like the "little buried mole," are "blind" to the intricate workings of the universe.

The alliteration in "buried" and "blind" as well as "day" and "die" adds emphasis to these moments of difficulty, while /m/ consonance in "mole," "mirrors," "Him," "must," and "some" offers a more comforting undercurrent: despite the suffering these lines describe, there's still a strong sense of rhythm and pattern guiding the poem. The same might be said for God's guidance in people's lives.

LINES 5-6

Make plain the ...
... the fickle fruit,

In these lines, the speaker turns to Greek myth as a lens through which to contemplate human suffering.

If God wanted to, the speaker says, he could "make plain the reason" that poor Tantalus is again and again "baited by the

fickle fruit." This allusion to Tantalus, the mythological figure doomed to reach eternally for fruit and water that were just out of his grasp, reflects the speaker's feeling that human suffering sometimes feels like a punishment from a cruel and vindictive god. The speaker, too, feels like the good things in life are so close, and yet so far away.

The /t/ alliteration and consonance in "tortured Tantalus," "baited," and "fruit" evoke the frustration Tantalus must feel at being forever taunted—the tip-of-the-tongue /t/ sounds echo the feeling of something being *right there in front of you* and still out of reach. The /f/ alliteration in "fickle fruit," meanwhile, suggests the relationship between Tantalus's suffering and the fruit which is never where it seemed to be when he reaches for it.

That tension between the way things seem and the way things are is at the heart of the poem's argument: it's hard to imagine that all this struggling and suffering could happen under the eye of a good and loving God.

LINES 7-8

If merely brute ...
... a never-ending stair.

Next, the speaker alludes to another figure from Greek mythology, saying that if God had a mind to, he could say whether "brute caprice dooms Sisyphus."

Sisyphus was another of Zeus's victims; as punishment, he was forced to push a boulder up a hill eternally. When he arrived at the top of the hill, the boulder would roll back down, and he'd have to start all over again. The sibilance in "caprice," "Sisyphus," "struggle," and "stair" evokes that boulder's slipperiness. This "never-ending" struggle feels familiar to the speaker, who has to wonder what kind of God would allow for such fruitless work, such grueling, unending pain.

The speaker's choice to evoke a "stair" rather than a more traditional hill or mountain is a telling one. Hills and mountains are natural structures, but stairs are human-made. This image suggests that the speaker's suffering is more a product of people than of God. God, as readers will learn at the end of the poem, made this poet's life harder when he made him Black. But Black suffering isn't God's will: it's a consequence of white people's failings.

The stair also brings a different set of connotations to the poem, as stairs and ladders are often associated with social status. No matter how hard he works, the speaker imagines, he may never make it up the metaphorical stairs of success built by and for white people. The first eight lines of the poem—known in sonnets like this one as the octave—ends on this note of perpetual struggle.

LINES 9-12

Inscrutable His ways ...
... His awful hand.

As the poem moves from its first eight lines (or octave) into its last six lines (or sestet), the speaker switches gears, moving from questions about human suffering to awe over the "Inscrutable" ways of God.

The speaker says that God's ways are "immune / To catechism." In other words, people's attempts to understand God and make Him understandable through religious doctrine are small and narrow compared to the vastness that is God. He can't be contained or fully understood by the human mind, which is "too strewn / With petty cares" to grasp the full picture.

In other words, according to the speaker, people are too distracted by the details of their material lives to make sense of God's purpose. God is mysterious, and it's not within humankind's capacity to understand "What awful brain compels His awful hand."

The diacope here draws attention to the repeated word "awful," which can mean both "terrible" and "awe-inspiring." This emphatic and layered repetition draws attention to an important idea: whatever God allows to happen isn't just a whim or an accident, but part of his all-seeing, all-knowing plan. The speaker suggests that what looks dreadful to people living their small, specific lives on earth is actually just a piece of a vast, awe-inspiring puzzle that only God can see.

LINES 13-14

Yet do I ...
... bid him sing!

In the poem's final couplet, the speaker attempts to reconcile his beliefs about God with the realities he confronts in his daily life.

The speaker believes God to be deeply and inarguably good, and yet the world is full of suffering. What's more, it's clear that the speaker himself suffers: to be a Black American in the early 20th century was hard enough, but to be a Black *poet* was almost unthinkable. The speaker is left to "marvel" at the strangeness of God's calling for him: he is both a Black person who will undoubtedly face enormous struggles, and a poet called to "sing," to share beauty and meaning.

The speaker's use of the word "marvel" suggests both astonishment and amazement. On the one hand, the speaker finds it "curious" that God would choose to make him Black and also ask him to sing. These things feel somehow contradictory or at odds to the speaker. How can he rejoice, make beauty, and share meaning when he is faced with so much hardship?

But there's a sense of gratitude and wonder here as well. The speaker realizes that the very unlikeliness of his situation is what makes it so meaningful. He hasn't stumbled upon this vocation accidentally; he's been chosen by God, and he's here to serve a purpose.

SYMBOLS

THE MOLE

The mole symbolizes the limited or partial knowledge of human beings compared to God's all-knowing view of the world. The speaker says that if he wanted to, God could explain "why / The little buried mole continues blind." The fact that the mole is described as "buried" speaks to the difficulty of being able to understand a situation when it is pressing in around you. And the mole's blindness resonates with the speaker's own inability to see the whole picture, the plan God has in store for him. Though he struggles to understand what compels the mole to "continue" despite not being able to see or understand *why* it lives as it does, the speaker ultimately trusts that there *is* a reason: it simply isn't available to him.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "And did He stoop to quibble could tell why / The little buried mole continues blind,"

TANTALUS'S FRUIT

Tantalus's fruit symbolizes the good things that are forever just out of the speaker's reach. In the myth the poem alludes to, Zeus condemns Tantalus to eternally stand under a tree whose branches move away whenever he reaches for the fruit hanging right in front of him. (Tantalus's name is the root of the word "tantalizing"!) Like Tantalus, the speaker perhaps feels that good things are in sight but out of reach. As a Black person he is particularly aware of the wealth of opportunities that are denied him only because of the color of his skin. In other words, for a Black person, living in a racist society is a punishment similar to Tantalus's; by design, Black hungers go unsatisfied.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-6:** "Make plain the reason tortured Tantalus / Is baited by the fickle fruit"

SISYPHUS'S STAIRS

The "never-ending stair" Sisyphus is doomed to climb is a symbol for grueling struggle—especially the grueling struggles of Black Americans. The allusion to the Greek myth of Sisyphus, who was forced to eternally push a boulder up a hill, evokes the speaker's frustration at the injustices Black people face in a racist society.

More generally, it sometimes seems as if all humans are doomed to repeat the same struggles over and over without ever really getting anywhere. It's hard for the speaker to see God's plan amid so much repetitive pain. The endlessness of Sisyphus's struggle makes the speaker wonder, if only momentarily, whether God is motivated only by "brute caprice," or in other words, sheer meanness.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 6-8:** "declare / If merely brute caprice dooms Sisyphus / To struggle up a never-ending stair"

POETIC DEVICES

DIACOPE

Diacope only appears once in this poem, toward the end, when the speaker argues that people simply can't fathom "What awful brain compels [God's] awful hand." That repetition draws attention to this important word—which can mean both "awe-inspiring" and "fearsome."

The "awful" things that God allows to happen are "inscrutable," or incomprehensible to humans. But the repetition of the word implies a certain logic exists, even if human beings aren't privy to it. God isn't just acting on a whim, but making an all-knowing decision and then acting upon it. So if people trust that God is inherently good and kind and has everyone's best interest at heart, then they must also trust that somehow God's ways make sense, even if they seem "awful" from the perspective of those who are suffering in any given moment.

The use of diacope in this particular example may also signal the presence of antanaclasis: that is, the word "awful" is repeated, but it means something different each time it is used. While the effects of God's hand may seem "awful" (as in terrible or dreadful) to people who don't understand His motivations, if they could only fathom the "awful" (as in awe-inspiring) brain behind that hand, everything would make sense. In other words, the speaker might be saying that humans can't comprehend the amazing mind behind the suffering that *seems* like proof of a cruel and capricious God.

Where Diacope appears in the poem:

- **Line 12:** "What awful brain compels His awful hand."

ASYNDETON

Asyndeton helps to set the pace of this poem. In the first line, the lack of coordinating conjunctions between "well-meaning" and "kind" allows the speaker to move more quickly to the next part of his point: that if God were interested in "quibbl[ing]," he could undoubtedly offer an explanation for all the ways in which people suffer. The quick pace of the poem's intro seems to say, hey, God's goodness is a given—but it sure doesn't look

that way. The swiftness of the asyndeton here encourages the reader to feel that having such doubts is a normal part of being human.

In line 6, asyndeton appears again: there's no coordinating conjunction between "fruit" and "declare." As this is the last clause in a list of examples, one would expect an "and" to separate it from the rest of the sentence. Instead, asyndeton speeds up the stanza and makes the speaker sound almost breathless, as if the list of reasons one might doubt God's goodness could go on and on. This breathlessness also ties in with the imagery of Sisyphus struggling "up a never-ending stair," allowing the reader to sense the way the speaker feels: exhausted, with no end in sight.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "I doubt not God is good, well-meaning, kind,"
- **Line 6:** "Is baited by the fickle fruit, declare"

ALLITERATION

Alliteration makes this poem sound musical and draws attention to important ideas.

The poem's first instance of alliteration is a great example. In the opening line, the speaker says that "God is good." Here, alliterative /g/ sounds make this statement feel even more powerful, drawing the reader's attention to the firmness of the speaker's belief. Even in a world full of misery, this first line stresses, the speaker doesn't doubt that "God" and "good" are intimately connected.

Later, /b/ alliteration on the words "buried" and "blind" suggests that the mole's circumstances and its inability to see are intertwined—just as humans, "buried" in their suffering, are "blind" to God's inscrutable plans.

In lines 5-8, the /t/ alliteration in "tortured Tantalus" is followed by /f/ alliteration in "fickle fruit," and "Sisyphus" starts a whole sequence of sibilant alliteration as he "struggle[s] up his "never-ending stair." These attention-grabbing sound patterns underline the speaker's point that human suffering often appears to be the will of a capricious god.

And in the final line, the /b/ alliteration in "black" and "bid" draws attention to the fact that, no matter how much the speaker may sometimes question God's ways, he ultimately trusts that God is the reason behind both his skin color and his calling to "sing."

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "God," "good"
- **Line 3:** "buried," "blind"
- **Line 4:** "mirrors," "must," "day," "die"
- **Line 5:** "tortured," "Tantalus"
- **Line 6:** "fickle," "fruit"
- **Line 7:** "Sisyphus"
- **Line 8:** "struggle," "stair"
- **Line 9:** "Inscrutable," "immune"
- **Line 14:** "black," "bid"

ASSONANCE

Assonance, like alliteration, gives this poem music and meaning.

For instance, a striking moment of assonance appears in the very first line of the poem, where the speaker says he "doubt[s] not God is good." The assonance really emphasizes this moment, which introduces the poem's big idea: the speaker claims not to doubt God's goodness, yet he can't help but be perplexed by all the suffering in the world.

Later, in lines 6-7, /oo/ assonance connects the words "fruit," "brute," and "dooms"—and also connects the Tantalus and Sisyphus myths. These long /oo/ sounds emphasize the perplexing cruelty of Tantalus's and Sisyphus's punishments, perhaps suggesting the doomed men's moans of misery.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "not," "God"
- **Line 5:** "plain"
- **Line 6:** "baited," "fruit," "declare"
- **Line 7:** "brute," "dooms"
- **Line 8:** "struggle," "up," "never," "ending"
- **Line 9:** "Inscrutable," "immune"
- **Line 14:** "bid," "sing"

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment helps to set the poem's pace and shape its argument.

The poem's first eight lines use an equal number of enjambments and end-stopped lines. But towards the end of this octave, more and more lines are enjambed, so the poem seems to speed up until its momentum comes to a sharp halt with an end-stop in line 8: "To struggle up a never-ending stair." After the energy of the enjambed lines, the end-stop makes the awful plights of Sisyphus and Tantalus feel final and frustrating.

The poem picks up its pace again in lines 9-11 ("Inscrutable His ways [...] to slightly understand"), as enjambment once again gives the poem momentum. The enjambment goes hand in hand with the speaker's thematic change of direction. Rather than focusing on the struggles that wreak havoc in people's lives, the speaker here acknowledges that God only *seems* capricious because people are not able to see through His eyes. Caught up in the energy of this argument for a while, the poem once again returns to using end-stopped lines as it reaches its conclusion: no matter how "inscrutable" God may be, it's clear the speaker has faith that his struggle is a meaningful one.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "why / The"
- **Lines 5-6:** "Tantalus / Is"
- **Lines 6-7:** "declare / If "
- **Lines 7-8:** "Sisyphus / To"
- **Lines 9-10:** "immune / To"
- **Lines 10-11:** "strewn / With"
- **Lines 11-12:** "understand / What"

ALLUSION

The poem uses two allusions to Greek mythology. The first is to "tortured Tantalus," who is "baited by the fickle fruit." Punished by the god Zeus, Tantalus was forced to stand in a pool of water under a fruit tree; when he became thirsty and reached for the water, or when he became hungry and reached for the fruit, the water would recede and the tree's branches would pull the fruit just out of reach. He was thus eternally thirsty and hungry, taunted by the very water and food he craved.

Similarly, Zeus doomed Sisyphus "to struggle up a never-ending stair." Sisyphus's eternal punishment was to roll a boulder up a hill over and over; at the top of the hill, the boulder would roll back down, ensuring that Sisyphus's task never ended.

Both of these allusions point to the seeming endlessness of human suffering—and especially the suffering of Black Americans like the speaker, who might have seen the burdens of life in a racist, white-dominated America reflected in these figures' torments. It is important to remember, though, that the speaker of this poem is only using these Greek mythological figures for effect; he himself believes in a "good," "well-meaning," and "kind" Christian God.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-8:** "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."

IMAGERY

There isn't a huge amount of imagery in this poem—and what imagery there is paints a pretty dismal picture. But that very grimness also evokes the speaker's firm faith and resolve.

The first example of imagery is in line 3, when the speaker describes something that doesn't make sense to him: why "The little buried mole continues blind." The word "little" evokes the vulnerability of the mole, and appeals to the reader's empathy. Why should something that is already so small and soft also have to navigate the world without sight? And this isn't just any world, but a world of dirt that "burie[s]" the mole. This poor little creature's unchangingly tedious task is to move forward through the dirt no matter what. This image clearly expresses the speaker's own frustration at having to "continue" his struggle without being able to see the bigger picture, the plan that God has access to but he doesn't. Like the little mole, the speaker feels vulnerable, but also compelled to continue doing what he was made to do: sing.

In line 8, the speaker uses imagery to a similar effect in his allusion to Sisyphus struggling "up a never-ending stair." Although Sisyphus himself was doomed to rolling a boulder up a *hill*, the word "stair" suggests an even more frustrating task. One generally thinks of a stair as *going somewhere*; stairs aren't built in the middle of nowhere, they're built in places where people expect to get from one place to another. While climbing stairs can be a bit of work, it's worth it once one gets to the top.

In Sisyphus's case, though, there is no end to the stair: only a constant "struggle" which seems to amount to nothing. This image expresses the speaker's sense of futility. As a Black man living in a racist time and place, where exactly would his hard work as a poet take him? He suspects he will get nowhere with this gift, this calling—and yet, like Sisyphus, he really feels he has no choice but to keep going.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "The little buried mole continues blind,"
- **Line 8:** "To struggle up a never-ending stair."

IRONY

Irony is one of this poem's most important tools. The speaker begins the poem by saying that he "doubt[s] not God is good, well-meaning, [and] kind"—but then he spends most of the poem describing the ways in which it appears God is cruel and capricious. In other words, the speaker is showing that things *appear* one way even though they are *actually* another way.

There is also irony in the fact that the speaker says he "doubts not" God's goodness—though he clearly does! He wants to believe his faith is unshakeable, but the truth is that even deep faith isn't enough to keep him from occasionally wondering "Why flesh that mirrors [God] must some day die." In a way, the poem is also saying that faith might *look* like a complete and utter lack of doubt from the outside, but on the inside, it has more to do with navigating inevitable doubts and choosing to believe in God's goodness in spite of them.

Finally, the speaker feels it is ironic that God would make him both Black and a poet. To be Black in the U.S. at the time this poem was written was certainly punishing: there was no way for a Black American to avoid the prejudice and cruelty of white people. But this Black poet is called to make beauty out of his lot in life! In fact, there's yet another layer of irony here: the speaker doesn't just find beauty *in spite of* his circumstances, but *through* them. His work is *more* meaningful because of what it will mean for other Black people who have likewise been wounded and silenced by racism.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-4:** "I doubt not God is good, well-meaning, kind, / And did He stoop to quibble could tell why / The little buried mole continues blind, / Why flesh that mirrors Him must some day die,"
- **Lines 13-14:** "Yet do I marvel at this curious thing: / To make a poet black, and bid him sing!"

VOCABULARY

Stoop (Line 2) - To bend down; to lower oneself.

Quibble (Line 2) - To argue about something small or trivial.

Tantalus (Lines 5-6) - A figure from Greek mythology, best known for the punishment Zeus inflicted on him. He was forced to stand in a pool of water below a tree with low-hanging fruit; when he reached for either the water or the fruit, however, it was always somehow just out of reach, and so he was hungry and thirsty for all eternity.

Baited (Lines 5-6) - Taunted or provoked.

Fickle (Lines 5-6) - Frequently changing; capricious.

Merely (Lines 6-7) - Only or purely.

Brute (Lines 6-7) - Beastly or savage; cruel; violent.

Sisyphus (Lines 6-7) - A figure from Greek mythology who, like Tantalus, is mostly famous for his punishment: he was forced to push a boulder uphill for all eternity.

Caprice (Lines 6-7) - A sudden change of mood or behavior with no apparent reason.

Inscrutable (Line 9) - Mysterious; impossible to understand or interpret.

Immune (Lines 9-10) - To not be affected or influenced by something.

Catechism (Lines 9-10) - A summary of the principles of the Christian religion used to instruct children or adults who have converted to Christianity, written in the form of questions and answers.

Petty (Lines 10-11) - Unimportant; trivial.

Strewn (Lines 10-11) - Scattered in an untidy or haphazard way.

Awful (Line 12) - Terrible or dreadful; inspiring reverential wonder or fear.

Marvel (Line 13) - To be filled with wonder and astonishment.

Bid (Line 14) - To command or instruct.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

The poem is an inventive kind of sonnet: it doesn't totally follow the conventions of either an Italian or an English sonnet, but borrows formally from both. As is typical in an Italian sonnet, for instance, the first eight lines propose a question or problem. In this case, the problem is an old one: why and how would a benevolent God allow so much suffering?

A slight turn, or volta, appears between lines 8 and 9 (where the volta would traditionally appear in an Italian sonnet) as the speaker moves from considering the paradox of God's goodness and human suffering to arguing that God's ways are simply "inscrutable" and it is not for people to understand them. This turn suggests a kind of answer or conclusion to the question or problem posed in the first eight lines.

However, the real volta appears in the final couplet, as is generally true in English sonnets. While the last couplet in an English sonnet often alters or reframes the solution in lines 9-12, poking a hole in it or flipping it on its head, this one attempts to keep the mystery intact. Rather than coming to any hard and fast conclusion, the speaker allows himself to "marvel" at the conundrum at the root of his poem: of all the inscrutable things God's done, the speaker can't help but wonder about the fact that he himself was made both Black and a poet!

METER

"Yet Do I Marvel" is written in iambic pentameter. This means the poem follows a very predictable and pleasing rhythm, using five iambs per line—that is, five metrical feet that go da-DUM. Here's how that sounds in the last line:

"To make | a po- | et black, | and bid | him sing!"

Many poems in iambic pentameter break from that meter occasionally for effect, but this poem is very consistent. This steady, musical rhythm underlines the speaker's belief that God has a plan for everything. Even as the poem describes terrible suffering, it maintains its smooth cadence, suggesting that no matter how bad things might seem in any given moment, everything is still in its place, and the tapestry of the universe is still intact, still beautifully woven.

But this meter also points to the poem's wider context. Just like the speaker, Cullen was a Black poet in a time when the conventions of poetry were defined by white people, and the majority of the people reading poetry were white as well. Though Cullen wanted to write about both the struggle and beauty of being Black, he also had to keep a largely white audience in mind. His perfect deployment of one of the most conventional forms in English poetry—the sonnet—was a way for him to prove that Black people could write within the

perimeters of tradition. While many poets today pride themselves on rebelling *against* those perimeters, it's important to note that in Cullen's time there were far fewer roads to being taken seriously. By appealing to a largely white audience with his perfect metrical form, Cullen was able to open a door that had long been shut to Black people.

RHYME SCHEME

This poem follows a straightforward rhyme scheme, built around an eight-line first section (called an octave) and a six-line second section (called a sestet). The octave follows this pattern:

ABABCDCD

The sestet is divided into three sets of couplets, like this:

EEFFGG

(Note that while the poem is a conventional sonnet in most ways, the rhyme scheme is innovative, and doesn't follow either the traditional Italian or English sonnet rhyme patterns.)

Along with its pattern of end rhymes, the poem uses an internal rhyme in lines 6 and 7 ("fruit" and "brute") as well as assonance (such as the /oo/ sounds in "brute" and "dooms" in line 7) and consonance (the /k/ sounds in "make" and "black" in line 14). All these matched and echoing sounds give the poem texture and intensity.

SPEAKER

The speaker of this poem is a poet and a Black man, and as such, resembles Cullen himself in some important ways.

A Black poet writing in the early 1900s, Cullen lived through a great revival of Black American art and literature, and became a key player in the Harlem Renaissance (see the Context section for more on that). But when he started out, there were very few Black poets for him to look up to, and no clear path for him to take. While the poem doesn't need to be read autobiographically to work, the bemused, soulful speaker can easily be read as an avatar of the author.

Whether or not he's autobiographical, the speaker is someone who is struggling to make sense of human pain and suffering—and to reconcile that pain and suffering with his belief in a kind and caring God. The speaker doesn't really reach a satisfying conclusion or solution, but he does seem to find some degree of acceptance. Like Job in the Old Testament, he admits he can't "understand" God; he can only "marvel" at his mysterious ways, which he continues to believe are purposeful and beyond reproach.

SETTING

There is no physical setting in this poem: it all takes place as an argument or exploration in the speaker's mind. While the speaker uses examples from nature (the mole) and mythology (Tantalus and Sisyphus) to illustrate his point, he doesn't set these figures in any specific landscape.

The closest thing there is to a setting in this poem is hinted at through the speaker's own identity as a Black poet in a hostile white society. But the speaker only subtly alludes to the external difficulties of being Black. Mostly, this poem takes place in his own fertile inner world.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"Yet Do I Marvel," one of Countee Cullen's most famous poems, was first published in his 1925 collection *Color*. Though *Color* was his first book, Cullen had already made a name for himself with works like "I Have a Rendezvous with Life" (1920), a poem he wrote and published while he was still in high school. After it won a local competition, this poem was printed in newspapers, magazines, and anthologies across the country. In 1924, Cullen's poem "The Shroud of Color" made him one of the best-known Black writers in America, and helped to usher in the Harlem Renaissance. Among Cullen's peers during this time were Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Claude McKay, and Jean Toomer.

Most influenced by the English Romantic poets (especially Keats), Cullen's work appealed to a largely white audience, and has more in common stylistically with white literary conventions than with the experimentation of other Black American poets of Cullen's day. As many Cullen's Harlem Renaissance contemporaries rejected the white literary canon in favor of writing authentically about Black culture, Cullen tried to distance himself from being seen as a "Negro poet" early in his career, and discouraged other Black poets from writing explicitly about race. (However, much of Cullen's work, including "Yet Do I Marvel," flies in the face of his own advice.)

While many of his contemporaries, including Langston Hughes, would eventually criticize Cullen for being too conservative and for "aspiring to a kind of whiteness," Cullen's depictions of Black joy and suffering continue to resonate. Cullen's poetry wrestled with timeless themes of beauty, love, mortality, and—despite his stated ambition to write on more "universal" themes—race.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Countee Cullen was born in 1903. Though he would later refer to New York as his birthplace, it's more likely that he was born in Louisville, Kentucky. At the age of nine he was separated from his mother, Elizabeth Thomas Lucas, and brought to New York by Amanda Porter, who was most likely his paternal grandmother. Though Porter would care for him until she died,

Cullen was adopted at the age of 15 by Frederick and Carolyn Cullen. Frederick Cullen was a Methodist pastor and would go on to have a great influence on Cullen's life, inspiring his lifelong devotion (however conflicted) to the Christian God.

Cullen attended a predominantly white high school and went on to study at New York University and Harvard. He rose to literary prominence very early in his life, though in later years his star faded as his more conventional verse fell out of favor. In spite of this setback, he remains one of the best-known poets of the Harlem Renaissance.

Known in its day as "The New Negro Movement," the Harlem Renaissance grew out of The Great Migration, which saw many out-of-work Black people leaving the South in the wake of World War I. Many of these Black migrants settled in Harlem, New York—a down-at-heel neighborhood that became a vibrant nucleus for Black art and intellectual life. The ideas which originated there would spread out across the U.S., and also deeply influenced many African American and Caribbean writers who had emigrated to Paris. Cullen was just one of many Black writers and artists who rose to prominence during this surge of creativity—a joyful upswell that would last until the Great Depression.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Reading of the Poem — Watch a reading and discussion of the poem by Todd Hellems for the Favorite Poem Project. (https://www.favoritepoem.org/poem_YetDoIMarvel.html)
- Biography and Poems — Read a biography of Countee Cullen and find links to more of his work at the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/countee-cullen)
- The Harlem Renaissance — Read an introduction to the Harlem Renaissance, the movement with which Cullen is most associated. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/145704/an-introduction-to-the-harlem-renaissance)
- Countee Cullen Reads Aloud — Listen to a recording of Cullen reading one of his most famous poems, "Heritage." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UvN96fn5xTE)
- An Essay on Cullen — Read an essay on Countee Cullen by Major Jackson, adapted from his introduction to Countee Cullen: The Collected Poems. (http://bostonreview.net/poetry-books-ideas/countee-cullen-and-racial-mountain)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER COUNTEE CULLEN POEMS

- From the Dark Tower

HOW TO CITE

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