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JEAN TOOMER'S LIFE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY AS
REALIZED IN CANE.

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JEAN TOOMER'S LIFE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY
AS REALIZED IN CANE

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JEAN TOOMER'S LIFE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY
AS REALIZED IN CANE

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ABSTRACT

JEAN TOOMER'S LIFE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY AS REALIZED IN CANE

by Brenda Joyce Shaw

This study concerns itself with Jean Toomer's life search for answers to the many complexities of life which he portrayed in his most famous work, Cane. Toomer experienced an identity crisis throughout his life, and he was caught between two worlds because his light complexion made him undistinguishable from white Americans. Toomer developed an unashamed and unrestrained love for the black race. Cane is an intense attempt on the part of Jean Toomer to come to grips with life, though it, as life does itself, leaves too many questions unanswered.

The intent of the study is to show the relatedness of Toomer's biography to Cane. The study examines the search for black identity as he sought the roots of the Negro self in his own life and expressed them in Cane. In this study, Cane is interpreted as it relates the values Toomer sought in life.

Chapter I introduces the reader to the problem of Toomer's search for identity as seen in Cane, while

Chapter II gives numerous biographical facts about Toomer, which are pertinent to this study of Cane. Chapter III gives estimates of Toomer's search for identity through his artistry. Many critics have found Cane interesting, and the uniqueness of the novel has provoked much criticism. Chapter IV interprets Cane and attempts to show the relatedness of the novel to Toomer's life search for black identity. Chapter V draws conclusions related to the search and the answers that are brought forth in Cane.

It is Toomer's acceptance and affirmation of the primitive vitality of rural, southern blacks which allows him to transcend both the sterility of the North and the suppressive mores of the South. Cane is more than an artistic celebration of Toomer's black heritage; it is ultimately an act of self-definition transformed into art.

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CHAPTER I

JEAN TOOMER'S SEARCH FOR IDENTITY

I have found that what is effective for me at one time . . . does not necessarily carry through to all other times and periods. So then, the searching begins anew.

Perhaps, . . . our lot on this earth is to seek and to search. Now and again we find just enough to enable us to carry on. I now doubt that any of us will completely find and be found in this life.

Jean Toomer

This study concerns itself with a search for black identity in Jean Toomer's Cane (1923) and a biographical study which suggests some answers to many of the complexities of his most famous work. The autobiographical element prevails very strongly throughout Cane, the single work for which Toomer gained his reputation as a literary figure. In biographical sources such as his autobiographical outline and sketches, Toomer clearly indicates that he was strongly moved by the range of philosophical possibilities in the idea of identity. His motivation finds as its source a quest for meaning, certainty, an understanding of the self, and particularly a quest for a true sense of psychological stability in a world that proved

chaotic and frustrating for him as an individual. The purpose of this study, then, is an effort to determine, by way of definition and interpretation of the identity problems in Cane, the essential character and essence of the black identity dilemma of Jean Toomer and how this dilemma is turned into art in Cane.

The study will also make some assessment of the credibility of the characters in the novel as the author sought to answer the question of black identity in European civilization. The characters are presented in such a manner as to make their search for self-definition believable; but the study is not merely concerned with the social question, for it also concerns itself with Toomer's artistry. At the same time the study points to the fact that the novel portrays the author's search for answers to the question of black identity.

Just who the black man is in European civilization with machines taking over the agrarian society he has always known is the question. Just where does he belong? How does he fit into a culture where he is denied wholeness and is merely tolerated? A sense of belonging seems most essential to any identity question. Where are the roots of the individual or the group; where must he go to obtain this sense of belonging? These are the questions under consideration as Toomer seeks black identity.

The black man's identity has always been problematical in America because the American dream promises to include all men in a common culture, but this dream has not yet been realized by blacks. The black man realized that the European civilization and American culture he dreamed of possessing were not at all what he really wanted, that with its industrialization it was aggressive, materialistic and dehumanizing.

Since an individual's or a group's identity can no more be taken for granted than his culture, and after such disillusionment with the America they wanted, Negroes began a search for their own selves. The frustrations of this search were intensified by general post-World War I uncertainties. The Negro as a native American lacked the former culture which could link him with the past. He had been uprooted and cut off from a past to which he could not return and with which he could not identify. Because of racism, the Negro was also denied the American dream which would have related him to the progress of America in wealth, building machines, and producing things. Therefore, the Negro found himself after the war being native to something of which he was not a part. Generally speaking, he was the man rejected, the citizen denied.

Out of the Marcus Garvey "Back-to-Africa Movement," which was based on his idea that America was the white man's

country and the black man had no place in it, came a new race spirit. Though Garvey never saw his dream materialize for many reasons, he led black Americans to seek a "meaning to their lives and worth to their personalities," which was the essential message of Garvey's unique gospel.¹ Realizing that he could be proud of himself, the new Negro began to recognize that he could feel a sense of deep pride and self-respect.

After World War I, during a period from 1920-1930, the Negro expressed this new found self-pride and new identification through an outpouring of literature, art, and music, which flourished during a period called the Negro Renaissance or the Harlem Renaissance. Not only was this phase in the life of the Negro a renewed race spirit that was to make it distinctive from any general phase within American letters, but this phase was a deliberate effort to articulate the discontent of the Negro. The time had arrived when the Negro writer must discontinue imitating white writers; he must no longer conform to genteel dogma, and he must release himself from the chains that bound him to the restriction that his black hero could not be aggressively critical of the order of things. Jeopardizing his chances for publication, it was now time to produce

¹Benjamin Quarles, The Negro in the Making of America, Revised ed. (New York: Collier Books, 1971), pp. 195-196.

artistic works, as Benjamin Quarles puts it, "that might be racial in theme but that would also be universal in depth and appeal."²

With the loss of serious concern for economic considerations and concerns for the approval of whites, Negro writers such as Jean Toomer became more, and importantly so, concerned about expressing themselves in their own way. Out of this frame of reference surfaces again the question of black identity. The black man is further challenged to seek a black identity by rejecting the stereotype which defined Negroes for most Americans. Americans felt blacks deserved poverty and dishonor as their reward for laziness, slovenliness, and excessive sensual appetite. "The Negro was pathetic or humorous, loyal or treacherous, servile or savage."³ It was left to the black writer to develop a character contradictory to the stereotype. He must delineate a hero or character who was honorable and sympathetic but nevertheless constrained within the limits of actual Negro experience.⁴ Therefore, Toomer sought to express himself in his own way about racial themes that were basic concerns of the black man. Yet, he

²Ibid., p. 199.

³Nathan Irvin Huggins, Harlem Renaissance (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 176.

⁴Ibid., p. 143.

had to remember that the Negro theme of black identity must be artistically fashioned with high technical skill and design for an audience not exclusively Negro. As he and other black artists dealt with the search for black identity, they were concerned with the question of belonging. Just where does the black man belong in this European society? How was he to be defined as a part of the American future? Toomer sought the answers to the question of black identity in Cane (1923).

Toomer experienced an identity crisis throughout his life, and he was caught between two worlds because of his light complexion which was undistinguishable from the white's complexion. He suffered this crisis not only because he was light enough to pass for white and still be a part of the black world, but because of many other complex reasons of identity ranging from sex to education to religion to individualism. Yet, he developed an unashamed and unrestrained love for the black race. This occurred after his visit to the South, there establishing a racial kinship necessary to treat blacks artistically as he does in Cane, which is considered by most critics as the single best literary work of the Negro Renaissance.⁵

Toomer's Cane is classed with the writings of the Harlem School of the Harlem Renaissance in its efforts to

⁵Quarles, p. 201.

use the primitive Negro as a subject for a compassionate art, but Toomer does so without propaganda as the propagandistic school was emerging about him. Devoid of propaganda, Toomer sought to stress the Negro's "Negritude" and to show himself suspended between two cultures. From the African culture he found a vitality and "panache" which would have been denied him had he chosen the white man.

Toomer was given the honor of being classed the first Negro stylist and artist. He learned and developed his craft from an intellectual and spiritual association with a circle of white writers and artists made up of Sherwood Anderson, Hart Crane, Waldo Frank, Paul Rosenfeld, Gorham Munson, Georgia O'Keefe, and Alfred Stieglitz. The artists shared with him a dedication to writing as an art, not necessarily Negro art or a humanist art but as an art stressing style, form, and symbol and perception.⁶

One might be tempted to ask just how Negroes were able to devise and express a culture and produce art in the "Ghetto-Harlem." One must not become preoccupied with our own moment of history which can only allow us to relate violence, crime, and poverty with Harlem. For many people today Harlem connotes a source of militancy, black community

⁶Frank Durham, "Preface," in Studies in Cane (Columbus, Ohio: Merrill, 1971), p. ix.

culture, and radical social change. Of this issue Nathan Huggins says:

Whether we see the ghetto as a center of despair or source of hope, we tend to read our assumptions, preceptions, and expectations. But the 1920's were almost a half-century ago, and we may miss more than we learn when we force upon that time our own frustrations. Recent histories of that "Black Metropolis" have tended to treat it as always having been a ghetto in the making. Because of our compelling interest in morphology of the economically deprived, we are likely to be insensitive to the fact that to Harlemites in an earlier decade the concept of Harlem becoming a ghetto would have seemed absurd.⁷

The renaissance writers were more optimistic and progressive than to believe that what they were building would, in time, imprison them. Although what was necessary to develop a ghetto was present in the 1920's, these Harlem intellectuals did not address themselves to the crime rates, the housing problems, and the poverty, but rather stressed the achievements of the blacks. They chose to present a positive self-image and chose themselves as demonstrators of the fact that the black man could think, do things, and strive to become cultured people. The Harlem intellectuals also were filled with positive assumptions and thus stood at the threshold of a new era in the lives of Negroes.

This study not only seeks to present Jean Toomer's search for identity in his own life and a search for black

⁷Huggins, p. 4.

identity closely related to his in Cane, but to reveal him as artist, to reveal his novel as an artistic whole, and to prove his literary genius. Moreover, through examination of the novel, this study seeks to define the black man, as he is defined in Toomer's Cane. Just what identity did this artist perceive for the black man in European society relative to the main characters of the novel? Just how much of Toomer's personal search for identity is reflected in Cane, as he found himself fluctuating between a white world and a black world? These are the real concerns, and many critics view Cane as a record of Toomer's personal search for black identity.

Toomer has been the subject of several studies, but only a few examinations have attempted to determine the nature and credibility of the search for black identity evoked by the fiction of Jean Toomer with specific concentration on the biographical and autobiographical material available on Toomer. Many critics make the observation that Cane is a record of Toomer's own search for black identity, but only a few do with specific references from his autobiographical materials housed in the Fisk University Archives. Though Toomer's Cane was written early in the decade of 1920-1930, it was, more than other contemporary novels by black authors, a conscious exploration of black identity. For Toomer, the black man

could find his identity in only the homeland, the South, which is related to slavery, the only past he has.

Toomer found himself caught up in a racial dilemma and so much so that he allowed himself to vanish into obscurity after the publication of Cane in 1923. Because he sought to project an image of the black man contrary to the stereotypes of the "aunties," "uncles," "mammies," "Uncle Toms," "Samboes," and the minstrel models, it was possible for him to depict life in a most sensitive and artistic fashion. He experimented with a prosaic and poetic design with realistic and mystic implications which apparently added to the beauty of Cane.

Though some critics, black and white, admit Cane's complexity and admit that there are parts that they do not really understand but vaguely guess at, they also admit that it has strange flashes of power, numerous messages, and numerous reasons for being.⁸ Toomer, then, is perhaps the most profound and most provocative writer among the other artists dealing with the question of black identity constantly in front of them during the Harlem Renaissance.

⁸See, for example, W. E. B. DuBois and Alain Locke, "The Younger Literary Movement," Crisis, 27 (1924), 161-162; Eugene C. Holmes, "Jean Toomer--Apostle of Beauty," Opportunity, 10 (1932), 252-254, 260; and Hugh M. Gloster, Negro Voices in American Fiction (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1948).

The results of this study should provide an interesting approach to the study of Jean Toomer and his Cane in Afro-American Literature courses and American Literature courses. It should not simply develop an interest in the study of Black Literature; for, according to Roger Whitlow in College English, in a recent nation-wide survey of Black Literature courses in 648 American colleges and universities, Black Literature is quite alive and doing well.⁹ This study should, however, demonstrate an illumination of ideas that will be artistically achieved through a thorough study of this particular novel. It should also open up avenues for further research on or study of Toomer and his artistry which, because of content, style, and Negro themes, makes him an extremely important figure in American Literature. It is to be hoped that the long literary silence about him and his art has ended, for not only do we have a great black writer writing during the Harlem Renaissance in search of black identity, but a great literary craftsman existing who has made an outstanding artistic contribution to the literary arts.

Cane is an intense attempt on the part of Jean Toomer to come to grips with life, though it, as life does

⁹Roger Whitlow, "Alive and Well: A Nationwide Study of Black Literature Courses and Teachers in American Colleges and Universities," College English, 36 (1975), 640-648.

itself, leaves too many questions unanswered. Perhaps an interest in him has been renewed and his creative work will be reexamined and reevaluated more widely and with greater intensity.

This study is limited to a biographical study of Jean Toomer, one of the most important black writers of fiction during the Harlem Renaissance. Its intent is to show a relatedness of his biography to Cane, the piece of fiction most pertinent to the career of Toomer. Although Toomer was not in Harlem during the time he was writing Cane, he served as a catalyst for the Harlem Renaissance. During the Renaissance, he knew Negro intellectuals such as Arma Bontemps, the painter Aaron Douglas, Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, Jessie Fauset, Langston Hughes, and Zora Neale Hurston. He was also the first black writer who had the courage to emancipate the colored world from the convention of sex. Toomer represented a kind of "racial consciousness," perhaps briefly, but most intensely.

Harlem, being the center of this new Negro movement, provided the Negro artist from Africa and the West Indies, from North and South, and from all classes and backgrounds with an infinite variety of human subjects. It, as well, gave him or her a chance to observe urban life. It is out of such a renewed spirit and during this new black literary movement that Jean Toomer produced Cane, but Toomer's short

visit to rural Georgia was his real inspiration for writing such a novel. His effort did not begin as a novel, but as sketches, short stories and a play, mixed with poetry, finding their way to such magazines as The Double Dealer, Broom, The Liberator, The Crisis, The Little Review, S 4 N, Secession, The Modern Review, Nomad, Prairie, and Opportunity. And, yet, Cane is not merely a collection of these genres, but it is a unified work of art, finding its means of unity through structure, style, and theme.

This study is further limited to an examination of a search for black identity as Jean Toomer sought the roots of the Negro self in his own life and expressed them in Cane. He sought to reveal an identity which rejected the stereotypes of his precursors. This study proposes to treat the novel only as it relates the values Toomer searched for in life, particularly his early years, with the values stressed in Cane.

Having constantly referred to the Harlem Renaissance, black identity, and the New Negro, it becomes necessary to make clear just what is meant by such terms. The Harlem Renaissance, sometimes called the Negro Renaissance, was essentially a period of self-discovery marked by a sudden interest in the social and cultural activities of the Negro. It is for this reason that on occasion this period is referred to as the Negro

Renaissance. Since Harlem in the 1920's and early 1930's was the capital of the black world, where poets, novelists, playwrights, journalists, sculptors, painters, and musicians congregated and worked to produce a sophisticated artistic expression, it is more often called the Harlem Renaissance. The Renaissance reversed the assimilation trend of the prewar period, with its conscious imitation of white norms and its deliberate suppression of "racial elements."¹⁰ Therefore, the major significance of the Harlem Renaissance was not so much in its actual artistic achievement, though a very important aspect of it, but in its representation of the development and consciousness of Negro culture.¹¹

In the Negro's search for black identity, he sought his character and personality in the American context. Since he had no surface manifestations of a former culture, there was nothing to link him to a past. He could not begin to know a place where his history began. The only thing that he could link himself to was slavery. Black identity, then, becomes a question of defining the Negro's role in the American culture which dehumanizes the Negro with its industrialism and materialism. The white American culture

¹⁰Robert A. Bone, The Negro Novel in America, Revised ed. (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1965), pp. 61-62.

¹¹Huggins, "Book cover statement."

separates the Negro from the freedom and beauty of his Negro heritage. Therefore, he lives in a dilemma, living by white American mores and by Negro systems and values. The freedom and naturalness of sex is hardened and restricted by the white culture; he is unable to express his emotions because of the restrictions placed on him in such an industrialized culture. Toomer, however, felt the Negro could find his identity, as he implies in Cane, by returning to the soil and to the songs of slavery, and to the memory of Africa.

New Negro is a term that has been used to describe both a racial attitude and a literary movement. New Negro is not a descriptive term in any literary sense; basically, it indicates a rejection of racial conservatism on the part of those who employ it. Alain Locke extended its basic meaning when in 1925 he published an anthology of young writers entitled The New Negro. From this time on the term was accepted as a designation of a literary movement. However, it is of considerable subjective importance that Renaissance writers thought of themselves as "New Negroes."¹² These terms are essential to an understanding of the aura surrounding the creativity of Jean Toomer. They provide the setting in which Cane was created.

Toomer rests among the scholars and creative artists who prepared the ground and planted the seeds of the

¹²Bone, p. 57.

New Negro Renaissance, and he stands above all the rest as a writer of genius. Toomer used Negro themes and principal characters and gave a thorough interpretation of black life in America, and he added greatly to the development of that dual-rooted segment of national writing which we call Negro. He had become an intricate part of the making of history and race-building which was to bring about a serious self-consciousness on the part of blacks.

CHAPTER II

JEAN TOOMER'S LIFE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY

One can hardly begin to discuss or attempt to understand Jean Toomer's Cane, written in 1923, without an awareness of elements in his life which point to a personal direction of an unusual perception of the black people. His first intention as a black writer is to describe the black American experience; then he seeks some reconciliation of the warring elements that still exist in the American experience. One could say that his novel is clearly autobiographical of his life in Washington and Chicago and the short time spent in Georgia as a school teacher. In a spiritual sense, the novel can also be considered a portrait or autobiography of Jean Toomer, the young black artist, similar to James Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist As A Young Man in his searching through self for a national or racial identity.¹

¹James Kraft, "Jean Toomer's 'Cane'," Markham Review, 2 (1970), p. 62.

The two major biographical sources are Toomer's "Outline of Autobiography"² and "Earth-Being: An Autobiography of Jean Toomer."³ Both manuscripts are housed in the Toomer Collection of the Fisk University Library in Nashville, Tennessee. Also, chapters of "Earth-Being" were published in January, 1971, by The Black Scholar. Toomer says in the preface of "Earth-Being": "I have a curious compulsion to write only about what I understand. I desire to write of what I know most. I have more knowledge of myself than of any other person or thing. Hence, I will write about myself. I will take my own life as material because my understanding of it exceeds my understanding of any other material, because it suits my purpose. So I am, certainly, to give record of my experiences."⁴ So it is a record of Toomer's life experiences as he understood them that will be considered here, for his experiences are essential to an understanding of the women in Cane, the dehumanized victims of Washington and Chicago, and of

²Jean Toomer, "Outline of Autobiography," unpublished manuscript in the Jean Toomer Collection, Fisk University Library, Nashville, Tennessee. Basically, all biographical material is taken from this source unless otherwise indicated; however, when Toomer is quoted directly from "Outline," it will be footnoted.

³Jean Toomer, "Earth-Being: An Autobiography of Jean Toomer," unpublished manuscript in the Jean Toomer Collection, Fisk University Library, Nashville, Tennessee.

⁴Jean Toomer, "Chapters from Earth-Being, an unpublished Autobiography," The Black Scholar, 2 (January, 1971), p. 10.

Kabnis, the northern educated Afro-American searching for his identity.

Nathan Eugene (Jean) Toomer was born December 26, 1894, in Washington, D.C. He remembers a lonely childhood, for, when Toomer was just an infant, his father, Nathan Toomer of Georgia, deserted his mother, Nina; and she returned home to her father, P. B. S. Pinchback. Pinchback was a very bitter man, and there were constantly bitter quarrels between him and Toomer's mother: Pinchback, having opposed her marriage to Nathan, frequently reminded her of her mistakes.

Pickney Benton Stewart Pinchback was the son of Major William Pinchback, a white planter of Holmes County, Mississippi, who had taken a beautiful slave girl and produced ten children. One of these was P. S. B. Pinchback who in 1846 was sent, along with his elder brother, Napoleon, to Gilmore High School in Cincinnati, Ohio. This was perhaps one of the first institutions in the North to exist with the original intention of educating mulattoes toward whom their slaveholding sires retained traces of natural affection. It was no secret that the students drawn to Gilmore School, from as far south as Louisiana, were the mulatto children of rich southern planters.⁵

⁵Arna Bontemps and Jack Conroy, Any Place But Here (New York: Hill and Wang, 1945), pp. 76-77.

Pinchback and his brother remained at Gilmore School until 1848, just prior to Major Pinchback's death. Naturally, there was confusion after his death. The mother and her children, who had earlier been sent to Philadelphia and set free, were advised by the administrators of the estate to flee to Cincinnati so that the heirs would not try to enslave them. Of course, they were unable to receive any portion of the estate, and it was, therefore, taken over by far more distant relatives. Napoleon, the oldest son, became insane while still in Cincinnati. However, Pickney was able to get a job as a cabin boy on a canal boat on the Miami Canal, running from Cincinnati to Toledo. From this tragic boyhood, Pickney grew into bitter manhood, though none of the other children of the Pinchbacks lived very long.

This was not the only event to turn P. S. B. Pinchback into the bitter old man with whom Toomer found himself living along with his mother and uncles. Pinchback followed the steamboats until the War Between the States, and by 1861 he had obtained the highest position attainable to a man of color. He had become a steward, but the war interrupted his business. He managed to get past a confederate blockade, making his way to New Orleans, where a year later he fought and wounded his brother-in-law, John Keppard. Released on bail and awaiting trial, he was picked

up by the military and was tried and convicted of assault with attempt to murder. He was sentenced to two years in the workhouse, but he was released three months later to enlist in the First Louisiana Volunteers. He was assigned almost immediately to assist in enlisting the Second Louisiana Regiment. He asked to be transferred to recruiting free men of color to Louisiana to defend the Union. In a week's time, from his office at the corner of Bienville and Villere streets in New Orleans, he had recruited a company ready for muster. Pinchback was captain of the outfit, and thirty days later they became part of the Second Louisiana Regiment. It was not long before the question of equal rights for colored soldiers arose, and they found themselves faced with prejudice. A year later, Pinchback and the other colored officers resigned. He later tried again with recruiting but gave up in Louisiana when the general refused to commission the originator of the command as captain.

After the war was over, Pinchback, an angry man, for two years went from city to city in the South expressing dissatisfaction with the unjust treatment of Negroes in the defeated states. He returned to New Orleans when Congress enacted the Reconstruction Acts. He organized the Fourth Ward Republication Card which was the start of a political career. This led him into a long series of appointive and

elective offices, culminating with the lieutenant governorship of Louisiana and election to the United States Senate in 1873. His seat in the Senate was hotly contested, then denied. The idea of men of the South looking down upon him on account of his color enraged him. He left the Republican Party in 1877 to support the Democratic Party. The sardonic Pinchback retained Republican confidence despite this refusal to seat him in the Senate, and he continued for three years to pursue the issue. Constant refusal left him with good reasons for growing more and more cynical. Bontemps comments that few men anywhere have been more completely, from birth to death, fortune's fool.⁶

This is the environment into which Nina brought her young son, Jean. Toomer, however, does recall in "Earth-Being" a very special relationship that developed even in this unusual situation in Washington. Toomer had spent all of his young life with his uncle Bismarck, and one day he realized the special relationship that had grown between them. He was particularly impressed with the position his uncle would take in the evenings after dinner. He would retire immediately to his room, get into bed with a book, cigarettes, and a saucer of sliced peaches, and read far into the night. He would even write upon occasion, trying

⁶Ibid., pp. 77-80.

his hand at fiction. It was at an early age that Toomer decided he wanted to live this way, in bed surrounded by the materials of a literary man.⁷

Toomer saw his uncle as a thinker rather than a man of action. He felt he wanted to become the thinker his uncle was, and he spent many hours at his uncle's bedside looking and listening to him with all seriousness. Of all the things that he was shown and they talked about, physical geography stood out most vividly. He loved seeing the earth in a book on physical geography and hearing ideas about the earth's nature and size. To him it was all quite wonderful. And though he was young, he was "growing a sense and forming an attitude towards my and our position on earth in the universe."⁸ Now he had a new way of seeing things. This early experience might have influenced the title Toomer chose for his autobiography, "Earth-Being." "As it is, I try to treat myself as if I were a second person. This is one reason why I title the book Earth-Being. I am trying to record the essential experiences of one of the beings born and existing on earth."⁹ Consciously or unconsciously, the attitude and vision formed from this experience with

⁷Toomer, "Earth-Being," pp. 3-4.

⁸Ibid., p. 5.

⁹Ibid., p. 10.

physical geography deepened and widened his world-view, and served as an integral factor in developing his mature way of viewing "life--men, earth-being."¹⁰

What he learned from his uncle Bismarck he felt was far superior to what his formal learning and teachers could teach him. To him, the conventional side of elementary learning was irksome, tedious, and unrewarding. With plenty of energy and some independence of spirit, he registered his feelings against reading, spelling, penmanship, arithmetic, and history, and admitted that "I was the class-room cut-up and the teacher's problem."¹¹ He actually resented the school system and resisted it. He felt that the school system was blind in its assumption that a child is "naturally recalcitrant and hostile to learning" and must be forced into getting his allotted portion of education. Toomer felt that "the child's brain, like the child's muscles, is eager to exercise itself if only it is given the right materials in a corresponding way."¹²

Even though under such a system he felt he was being "maltreated," he admits that at the same time he had a lot of fun at school. Some of his fun was only natural for a

¹⁰Ibid., p. 5.

¹¹Ibid., p. 7.

¹²Ibid.

child his age, but some of it came from an instinctive resistance to authority and was added to by the conflict produced in him by his relation to his mother and her callers. Some of his activities would amaze the reader such as: "I threw crayon and erasers about the room. I emptied ink-wells and rolled them up the aisle against the teacher's desk. I teased the girls. I sent notes, I stomped my feet and made strange noises. During recesses, I'd race in and out raising all possible racket. . . . The cloak-room was a private torture chamber. . . . I was punished more often for cloak-room escapades than for any other of my scrapes."¹³ It was unusual for one child to carry on all of the activities, but Toomer says it was somewhat because he felt privileged and immune due to his grandfather's position and influence.

However, none of these mischievous acts could compare with what he called his favorite prank, "the catching of flies." He got many laughs and great pleasure out of coming up to a girl, placing his fist with fly near her head, and calling her name, only to have her turn around and feel the fly buzz directly in her face. He even had to do it to his teacher once when she insisted that he come up to her desk and let her see what he had doubled up in his fist. He, of course, was punished. He was made to stay

¹³Ibid., p. 8.

after school and do much spelling. The teacher punished him one day for teasing the girls by having him put on a girl's dress and apron and stand for an hour before the class. Being the classroom cut-up, he did not really mind, for there was a kind of distinction there before the class making his audience laugh by making faces on the sly. He says: "I became the talk of the entire building. My prestige mounted accordingly."¹⁴

As indicated earlier, Toomer felt he could learn more from his Uncle Bismarck, so he mostly had fun in school and learned comparatively little. Thus, in Toomer's youth "there were grade schools" on the one side and Bismarck on the other. This is the beginning of a pattern which continued with minor variations throughout his life--a pattern of his being more or less affiliated with conventional agencies but deriving little understanding from them and, on the other hand, receiving his genuine education by "free informal" means. This pattern is seen in later periods of his life, as in high school and his independent readings and studies and discussions with a close friend, in his college years in classes and his self-directed inquiries, and in mid-life, the world of accepted formal knowledge in contrast with his own personal experiences, with his literary work, and with the Gurdjeff method and body of

¹⁴Ibid., p. 9.

ideas.¹⁵ So what seems to be most active in the life of Toomer is this contrast between the conventional and the unconventional. He felt that there was no fun in being conventional, but that convention does serve a purpose in that it gives one the opportunity to be unconventional. The unconventional makes one's life dramatic and adventurous, and it calls from one his utmost cleverness and skill.¹⁶

Thus far, the discussion has focused on Toomer's early years in his Washington home on Bacon Street before Pinchback's financial decline. Little attention has been given to his mother's role in his life at this point because Bismarck seemed to dominate Toomer's early years of development of ideas and views about man and life. After many quarrels with her embittered father, Toomer's mother moved to New York in 1905. Left behind, Toomer blamed no one else but his grandfather for forcing his mother to leave him. Soon after she arrived in New York, she married again; and, shortly afterwards, the Pinchbacks joined her in Brooklyn with Toomer, whom they called Eugene Pinchback in order to completely obliterate the memory of his father.¹⁷

Toomer used to have terrific nightmares and experienced a serious illness which resulted in a radical

¹⁵Ibid., p. 10.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 9.

¹⁷Darwin Turner, In A Minor Chord (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1971), p. 6.

change in his entire world, both external and internal. He became pensive and withdrawn and began building up a richer inner life in which inner things became more real and interesting than the world outside. This inner life gave him a life of his own and conditioned him to better endure the breakup of the Washington home, which was soon followed by his mother's marriage previously mentioned.

The move to Brooklyn made his life no happier than it had been in Washington, even though he was stimulated by the big city which was developing commercially and politically. It was in Brooklyn that he began to see and feel twentieth century America. Meanwhile, his home conditions did not improve for him. He lived in an apartment with his mother and stepfather on the corner of Lewis Street and Putnam Avenue. Unable to adjust to the strange man his mother had married, he felt betrayed and longed for the father he had never known. His difficulties in adjusting lasted for only a short while, and he tried not to show his feelings of displacement and unhappiness.

Under such a strain, Toomer still had a zest for study and, therefore, forged ahead in his studies and won several prizes. But then he was to be moved again. His mother and his stepfather took a house in New Rochelle. Toomer's grandparents were left in Brooklyn but soon returned to Washington. Though his parents tried to make

the adjustments easy for him, Toomer never accepted his stepfather or the situation. Once again he began building his own private life which was not difficult for him, for he had already learned to withdraw into himself and be self-sufficient. As he discovered the library and began reading novels and books of knighthood, chivalry, and King Arthur, he was strongly impressed by them, and they shaped his views of life, ideas, and notions about men and women.

Soon he discovered Long Island Sound, swimming, fishing, and sailing. He began to show a liking for New Rochelle since it was more like Washington, a feeling he never acquired for Brooklyn. He soon became a skilled skipper at the tiller, and the contact with the water released an entirely new part of his nature. He developed a passion for the water or what he called the "sea-spirit." This "sea-spirit" caught him in a heavy gale in the Sound, but he was able to fight his way out of it. He even began to write stories and poems about his experiences in boating and the "sea-spirit"; and, as his boating and writing continued, he grew stronger physically.

Meanwhile, the situation at home was getting worse. His mother had to take on much of the responsibilities and had to make ends meet because his stepfather misrepresented his income. Toomer watched the pair grow farther and farther apart. He felt his mother to be far superior to his

stepfather and bitterly said, "Well, you ought never to have married him."¹⁸ His agonizing mother said her heart was breaking, and meanwhile she developed a case of appendicitis. The resulting appendectomy was apparently successful, but she suffered a serious relapse and died June 9, 1909. He remembers saying, "In my own heart I knew she died, not because of the operation, but because she did not want to live."¹⁹ He continues his remorse by saying: "And thus in New Rochelle, I learned that death can come to those we love. I tried to conceal the feelings I had, but secretly I looked at older people around about me, people who must have experienced a loss similar to mine. They seemed cheerful and full of interest in other things. I wondered how they had overcome their grief."²⁰

Nina left her son in legal guardianship of his grandmother, suggesting that she had not intended for him to be cared for by his grandfather or his stepfather. His grandfather and stepfather had a disagreement after Nina's death, and Toomer never saw or heard from his stepfather again. Thus, upon returning to Washington with his grandfather, he became legally and generally the child of the Pinchbacks. He also blamed his grandfather for his father's

¹⁸Toomer, "Outline," p. 6.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid., pp. 6-7.

disappearance and for his mother's remarriage and death.²¹ He returned to his grandmother with a desperate need for love and understanding. Nina Emily gave him love, which Toomer returned, but she could not help him intellectually; she could not give him the answers to all the new questions which he was forced to answer himself.

Toomer's return to Washington in 1908 at age eleven, ready to begin eighth grade, thrust him for the first time into a black neighborhood and school. His return was, then, not to the old Washington he had known before, not with such friends as Dutch Bergman and his other Bacon Street friends, but he moved to Florida Avenue with his Uncle Bismarck and his wife. His move was from a white neighborhood to the heart of the Negro upper class world. Toomer remembers that "With this world--an aristocracy--such as never existed before and perhaps will never exist again in America--midway between the white and Negro worlds. For the first time I lived in a colored world."²² The life in his new neighborhood and with his new friends held for him "more emotion, more rhythm, more color, more gaiety. I began to have my emotions fed directly from life."²³ Darwin Turner speaks of a less pleasurable side of his move to Florida Avenue:

²¹Turner, p. 7.

²²Toomer, "Outline," p. 8.

²³Ibid.

"Previously, he had lived among people indifferent to their varying shades of complexion. Now, gangs of black youths fought against gangs of whites, and called him to join them. But, identifying himself with both groups, he could join neither."²⁴

He made it successfully through the eighth grade. His work was good, and he had all the usual experiences of falling in love with older girls who would pay him no attention. Meanwhile, his home situation was certainly anything but ideal. His grandfather's age was showing more, and his grandmother was having more sick spells. Through it all, he managed to graduate from eighth grade with honors and looked forward, with great expectancy, to the exciting life of high school. It is before his graduation that he had his first experience with Dickens and with novels and literature which described actual life conditions.

In the beginning he did fairly well in high school, showing special aptitude for algebra and physical geography. It was during the summer of this year, which he spent in Brooklyn, that he began thinking about what he wanted to do in life. Discussing the matter with his grandmother left him with the hope of going to prep school. He wanted to go to either Andover, where one of his uncles had gone, or to

²⁴Ibid., p. 14.

Exeter, then to Harvard, and perhaps to Harvard Law School. But this dream never came about.

Meanwhile, his grandfather had taken a new job with the Internal Revenue which demanded his leaving Washington for New York. Toomer and his grandmother moved out of his Uncle Bismarck's house into a small apartment. His grandfather's move did not affect Toomer's high school career, for he found great interest in physics, electricity, and the physics laboratory. Nonetheless, he did suffer acute emotional and sexual problems during the second half of his sophomore year, which caused his studies to fail drastically. He believed himself in love now that he was going with a girl named Vic who had ignored him when he was in the eighth grade, and this period began what he labeled "the beginning of my stress and strain period."²⁵

Disregarding the values of school, he became a rebel in the classroom. His teachers labeled him "an indifferent student but a difficult and devilish young man."²⁶ Toomer had no real use for what was being taught in the classroom. To him the readings and discussions he and Son Kennedy held when they would go off into the woods were more important. They read and discussed Shakespeare, and they recited their favorite passages. Now that he had grown restless in high

²⁵Toomer, "Outline," p. 13.

²⁶Ibid.

school, he decided to take extra work so he could graduate in three and one-half years. Added to this was the care of his grandmother. He was unable to participate in the usual activities of high school young people, and, instead of fun and other experiences, he had jobs on Saturdays and after school selling Saturday Evening Post, delivering for a cleaning and dyeing firm, and working at a drug store.

Aside from all these responsibilities, Toomer was still plagued with sexual problems. He had an avalanche of what he terms "sex indulgences" and felt and looked wretched, as everyone noticed. His grandmother sensed his problems, and he believed she prayed for him since she could do nothing else. Sexuality was something that he had to face and struggle with himself. He had already developed a response to any situation which he could not dominate; he would withdraw from his friends to face the problem alone. Realizing that he was falling apart, he sought a means of building himself up. He dedicated himself to developing his body physically by imposing self-discipline. He began his own physical training, taking exercises at home regularly, correspondence courses in muscle building, and health promotion using dumbbells and wrestling; then he moved on to heavy weight lifting. Toomer, reflecting upon this period recalls, "By force of nerves and indefatigable persistence,

I grew muscularly strong to the point where I could lift a hundred and twenty pounds with one arm."²⁷

Shortly afterwards, Toomer had another experience with overpowering sex impulses which he felt reduced him so low that he feared it was destroying his health. Desperately, he began breathing exercises, lived more carefully than ever, and by sheer force and will pulled himself out and entered high school athletics. Although no one was really aware of the critical state he thought himself to be in, everyone could see that he was now an exceptionally strong and healthy young man.

During his fourth year of high school, he was somewhat lonely because his friend Kennedy had graduated and gone off to college. Yet, it was in this year that he had fully realized the development of his own view of life, for he says, "I become increasingly disgusted with most of the life around about me. What are these people doing with their lives? Surely I don't want to be like them. I see and I feel more in life than they will if they lived to be a thousand years old. I feel seasoned, and mature. I have as it were, gone down to the depths, and have come out."²⁸ Perhaps he did not want to be like the other people he had seen, but he was not sure of what he did want to be. Having

²⁷Toomer, "Outline," p. 13.

²⁸Ibid.

graduated from high school in three and one-half years, he found himself unsure of what he would do between March and time for college in the fall. In fact, he had not even decided on college. He knew it would be some place other than the usual colleges where almost everyone else had gone. Added to this uncertainty was his grandfather's retirement and decline into almost poverty; and when his grandfather returned from his job in New York, Toomer, realizing that Washington was not the place for him, decided to go to the University of Wisconsin to study agriculture, of all things. It was at the University of Wisconsin that Toomer formulated his own views of his racial composition and position.

Toomer says:

Going to Wisconsin, I would again be entering a white world; and, though I personally had experienced no prejudice or exclusion either from the whites or the colored people, I had seen enough to know that Americans viewed life as if it were divided into white and black. Having lived with colored people for the past five years, at Wisconsin the question might come up. What was I? I thought about it independently, and on the basis of fact, concluded I was neither white nor black, but simply an American. I held this view and decided to live according to it. I would tell others if the occasion demanded it.²⁹

Therefore, Toomer feared alienation if he were identified as Negro and consequently volunteered nothing about his ancestry; if questioned about it, he gave only perplexing answers.

²⁹Ibid., p. 16.

During the summer of 1914, he left for Madison, Wisconsin, which was his first decided break away from home and his first adventure into a new world completely his own. But this was merely the beginning of six years of a single pattern as he desperately sought permanent interests. Time and time again he became excited over a new career, pursued it frantically, only to abruptly withdraw and return despondently to Washington and his grandfather to lick and heal his wounds. This period of college, trials and failures, and the beginning of the life of literature lasted from 1914 to 1920.

Toomer's first summer went very well, especially his studies in English. Soon he had entered the swing of the summer session and hoped to return to the university in the fall. He made many friends, particularly Rose Hahn and her family. They were extremely cordial towards him and he began to enjoy sailing and swimming. He became somewhat of a figure on campus that summer which carried over to the fall as he entered the freshman class. But soon his stardom began to lose its glow, and his great number of friends dwindled to a small group. He was beginning to find the people crude and far less warm than those he had known in Washington. Soon he began to ache and hunger for warmth and love.

He became indifferent towards his studies, and he felt unprepared for an agricultural course he was taking. Not only had he lost interest, but he had no urge to learn about cattle and crops. Though he was experiencing some difficulty in mathematics, he continued to do fairly well in English. His instructor, Mr. Manchester, encouraged him to write, get interested in ideas, and read the Nation, New Republic, and more literary publications, but Toomer could not see himself as a writer. He was far more interested in athletics and the social life of the university. Actually, he became more and more aware that he was not fitted for a farmer, not scientific or otherwise.

He decided to discontinue his studies at the university. His reasons for leaving Madison were complex, but outstanding among them was the compulsion he had to be nearer Phyllis Ferrell, a girl he had known in Washington and fallen madly in love with during the Christmas break when he returned to Washington. It was after he had passed mid-year examinations that he quit Madison for good, returning to Washington. Phyllis was away in school in Vermont, but he hoped to see her Easter.

When he returned to Washington, his grandparents were quite shocked. After his explanations, his grandparents accepted his action. Family friends and others did not accept his actions as well, for they talked of him as a

failure and began entertaining the notion that he was a queer fellow, different from everyone else. Of course, this posed little problem for Toomer because for him this was the beginning of his "individualization." "For now more than ever I had to fight and struggle for my own way--not without periods of great doubt."³⁰ Because he felt a need to justify his position, he became articulate and built up his own world on fancies and rationalizations. He began a deeper, more sincere, and more penetrating questioning of himself and of life.

He was certain he had done the right thing by first leaving Washington and now also in leaving college, but what would be his next step? For a period of three or four years he literally wondered about America. Though his grandmother began to lose faith in him, he still had Phyllis and Kennedy supporting him during this period. Phyllis' affection for him and his for her allowed an expression of his love, but this soon came to be but a small portion of his increasingly complex and troubled life. He says, "I was swiftly learning that life in general and my life in particular was a thing far more complicated and involved than even the sufficiently complex nature of love."³¹ Kennedy was the only one he could

³⁰Ibid., p. 20.

³¹Ibid., p. 22.

talk to, yet they were separated and he had only himself to communicate with.

To solve the problem of what to do with his life now, he decided to apply the next fall to the Massachusetts College of Agriculture, despite the fact that he had disliked his agricultural studies at the University of Wisconsin. Amherst was lovely, and he liked the fellows living with him in a fraternity house there. Soon after beginning training for the football team, he was made temporary captain. Toomer then left the college he had decided to enter. He became disgusted with the difficulties he encountered in having his credentials transferred from the University of Wisconsin to Massachusetts College of Agriculture. Although this seems a very petty reason for leaving, this is why he decided to leave.

He took a train to New York, remaining there until his money ran out, only to return to his disappointed grandparents and uncles. While he was in Washington, he decided to capitalize on his athletic abilities and interests, and, in the winter of 1916, he entered the American College of Physical Training in Chicago. He liked Chicago, his work, and the people, and it followed that he did good work physically and academically. He developed as a gymnast, a basketball player, and became almost an expert in anatomy. He did so well that one of his instructors

talked to him about entering medical school and offered to vouch for his ability as a student. Toomer considered it. Because he wanted to be more than a gym instructor, he decided to enter a premedical program at the University of Chicago which he refers to in his "Outline" as Midway University.³²

It was there that he met a friend who was a socialist, and he became interested in society and sociology in general. This was the first time he had ever given any serious thought to society. Previously, both his political and social views had been influenced primarily by his grandfather, his schooling, and the reading he had done. All of his thinking heretofore had been individualistic. Now he announced himself as a socialist and became the chief expounder of socialism in the school. During this period he also became attached to a girl, Eleanor Davis, to whom he could really talk about his ideas about life. She was quite mature and independent in her thinking, and she stimulated Toomer greatly.

Toomer then began neglecting his formal studies to study society and sociology, for he had become very serious about socialism. He decided to quit both the American College and the University of Chicago. His decision was hastened by lectures on naturalism and atheism he had heard

³²Ibid., p. 24.

downtown in Chicago's Loop. The speaker was Clarence Darrow, who fed Toomer on Darwin and Haeckle, and suddenly Toomer found his whole world had completely collapsed; he found himself in a world without a God. He recalled, "I felt that the foundation of the earth had been pulled from under me. I felt like a condemned man, swinging with a rope about his neck. For several days I was so stunned and broken that I could hardly do more than lay on my bed in a darkened room and I felt I was dying. Also, I felt as if somehow I had been betrayed. I didn't want to see anyone. I didn't want to see the light. In truth, I did not want to live."³³ Nothing meant anything to him now. However, he managed to pull himself together once more. He went through a period of intellectual activity such as he had never experienced before. He read voraciously, novels and books on socialism and evolution, culminating in his desire to write and lecture.

He obtained permission from the American College to use a room as a lecture hall. He gave lectures on Victor Hugo, evolution, society, and one on the intelligence of women which ended his lecturing because he angered the Dean of Women. Though his lectures ended, the experience had been an intoxicating spree. Nevertheless, he continued reading and thinking and talking with Eleanor. The two did not

³³Ibid., p. 26.

really love each other, but Eleanor believed in him and inspired his efforts.

It was in the spring of this same year, 1916, that he suddenly decided that his experience in Chicago had come to what he called a "psychological end." He left for Washington. Rather than try to make his grandparents understand the nature and wealth of his experience in Chicago, he made them believe he had graduated. The truth was that Toomer felt he had derived more from his stay in Chicago than he ever could have by graduating from any college. "I was in living vital contact with the ideas and thoughts of my century. Chicago had indeed witnessed and brought about the birth of my mind. And, of equal importance, I was again full of strength, physical and moral and mental, again with zest for life with greater self-confidence."³⁴ This particular retreat to the Pinchback home led to his grandfather's admission that Toomer would make something of himself yet.

There in Washington that spring, Toomer was fired by a reading of Lester Ward's Dynamic Sociology, and he felt he must return to college. He wanted a degree, a master's, a Ph.D., and to get a job in a school or university and devote his leisure hours to the life of a scholar. In the summer of 1917, Toomer enrolled in New York University to

³⁴Ibid., p. 28.

study sociology. He became very interested in history following a lecture by a visiting historian from the City College of New York. Consequently, he followed the historian to City College and enrolled in a history course. Finding his sociology course to be "nothing," he devoted himself to his history course and did well. He did so well that his professor recommended him as "an excellent student" which got him a job as assistant to the librarian the next year. It was here that Toomer had his first contact with the works of George Bernard Shaw.

Socially, Toomer enjoyed himself in New York, so much so that the fellows he ran with marvelled at him. They could not quite understand how he could be so excellent in his studies, carry on courses at two places, and still have time and energy to attend "tasting parties" at various saloons, play tennis, and dance. Toomer said to himself, "In truth, I was a dynamo that summer. My strength and zest seemed to be inexhaustible."³⁵

Something happened to Toomer that summer that came as quite a shock. He received a letter from Eleanor as he was about to leave his room at New York University for final examinations at City College. He read it on the subway, finding out that her guardian, in one last effort to separate the two, had told her that Toomer, he was sure, had

³⁵Ibid., p. 30.

Negro blood. Her guardian had taken her to a restaurant and pointed out a few light skinned Negroes to prove his point. She had told her guardian that it made little difference if Toomer did have Negro blood because she liked him for what he was, whatever that might have been. Thus, the guardian's tactics had failed, and Toomer admired Eleanor all the more after realizing what she had been going through. He felt hatred for the guardian because he had felt all along that the guardian wanted her for himself. As far as he could remember, this was the first time that his race had been used against him as a deliberate weapon. In his answer to Eleanor's letter, he gave her the facts of his racial composition as he knew them and his individual position as well. Her reply of gladness in knowing left her opinions and feelings of him the same.

When Toomer returned to City College in the fall, he worked in the library after classes to help his financial situation. He roomed with his Uncle Walter whose wife had died. His uncle had moved to New York and found a job at Macy's. Most importantly, that fall Toomer began to feel the need to go into one subject thoroughly, as his maturity made it tedious for him to sit through classes and listen to the other students "bungle" through them. It was his psychology class with an exceptionally good professor that interested him more and more, and there he placed greatest

concentration. "Soon I concentrated my entire energies on it, convinced that herein, rather than in social theories, lay the key, and the one fundamental approach to life."³⁶

While Toomer was in summer school in Madison, his ideas and aims were exposed to war. Europe had declared war in 1914, and in 1917, while Toomer was in Chicago, America entered the war. He seemed to like the idea of being a soldier. His grandfather had been in the Civil War, and his Uncle Walter had been in the Spanish American War. In Washington he had terrible run-ins with both because they were more patriotic than realistic. They felt he was obligated to fight for his country and pointed out the advantage of becoming an officer over being drafted as a private. He held his ground and got his way until he was drafted. By the end of the fall term at City College, he got the war fever as it was increasing everywhere. War inclinations strongly contested his aims and values. As the time drew near for his physical examination for the draft, he was not sure what would happen. All of his studies would have been wasted, but he remembered that the upshot was that, not long afterwards, he could endure college no longer. Therefore, after going to Washington for his examination and after being rejected because of bad eyes and a hernia gotten in a basketball game, he decided it was impossible for him

³⁶Ibid., p. 31.

to return to college. He felt he had to do something more active.

This need for more activity propelled him to Chicago, and he stayed in a fraternity house with Harry Karstens who had graduated from American College and was at Chicago University at that time. In Chicago he began a series of the many ideas of what he could do with his life. First, he decided to do farm work. He contacted someone he knew from Rockford with a large farm, but nothing came of this. As his funds ran low, he took a job as a Ford car salesman. It was deadly cold in Chicago, and he needed a car for the job since he had to go from door to door. The sub-zero weather caused him to quit his job, and he swore he would never again let himself be found in the North in the winter. He wanted to go to Mexico or South America or somewhere where it was warm. Therefore, he tried to influence several farmers into sending him down there with goods. He pretended to be an expert salesman with particular knowledge of things South American. However, nothing came of it. On a train in Chicago, out of sheer desperation, he began writing. What he was writing was a short story which he said was terrible. He continued writing at the fraternity house because he was seriously concerned about what he was going to do. Feeling desperate

he said, "The world outside seemed to be frozen like ice. It offered not a single place for me."³⁷

His first thought was of returning to Washington since he could not stay on at the fraternity house forever. Then a break came. He received an offer from Milwaukee to take a position as a substitute physical director in one of the schools. One of his friends from American College was working there and was leaving to join the army. The job was only to last two or three weeks, but Toomer jumped at the offer because it offered him bread and butter.

After being in Milwaukee for about a month, he rediscovered the works of Bernard Shaw. He read Shaw extensively, and later he credited Shaw with having made him aware of literary style and having introduced him to the intellectual life.³⁸ Shaw's works gave his life a radical turn. He felt he should be independent and candid, and so this is what he did after having experienced so many failures and such acute discrepancy between what he felt and what he could manifest. Thus, he felt himself, for the first time, finally reaching intellectual and psychological independence. Toomer said that he was what he was and the world could take him or leave him.

³⁷Ibid., p. 34.

³⁸Darwin Turner, p. 8.

His experience was so wonderful and intense that he stayed on in Milwaukee some time after his job was over. Toomer's funds ran so low that he could hardly eat and could not get back to Washington. He wrote to his grandfather for fare back to Washington. Sending the bare minimum, his grandfather said that it was the last money he would send him. This was certainly an expression of Toomer's grandfather's complete disappointment in him. Of course, his grandfather made the situation as unpleasant for him as he could once Toomer was back in Washington; therefore, he left. His grandfather sponsored his trip to New York to get work at one of the stores of the firm of Acker, Merrall, and Condit Company. They were able to hire him, and he worked long, hard hours.

Taking a room on 13th Street just off Sixth Avenue, he spent his evenings there where he met a girl, Eleanor Minne. She or one of her friends introduced him to the Rand School, and he began to feel himself to be a potential poet and writer; but the work at Acker, Merrall, and Condit Company took all the energy out of him, and he could write nothing.

In the summer he was sent to the Mt. Kisco region in Ossening, New York, as district manager. He was able to organize his work so that he only worked three to four days a week. Not only was he able to earn enough to live on so

so that he would not need to lean on his grandfather but he also had time to read a lot and to write a little. Though writing seemed to come naturally, he had no intention of getting any of it published. He was developing an aesthetic sense in literature.

As soon as he thought he had found a life's work, he became excited by a new career. He had met a girl who lived just up the street from him, and from this association Toomer thought he was to be a musician, a composer. Their playing and singing gradually awakened his old love for music first started by the singing and playing of his mother. Music, then, seemed much nearer his heart, much more a natural and spontaneous form of expression than literature. He decided to give it a serious try.

After returning to New York in the fall, one of the first things he did was to rent a piano. Feeling the need for music lessons which, of course, would cost money, he sought a second job. He was hired as physical educator and gym director at the University Settlement on the East Side. He moved down there, kept his job with Acker, Merrall, and Condit Company, found a piano teacher, and began a very rigid schedule. He began early in the morning with breakfast, piano exercises, studying harmony and composition, reading in literature (particularly Shaw and Ibsen), and trying his hand at some writing of his own.

After lunch he worked part time at Acker, Merrall, and Condit Company; three afternoons he had piano lessons, and then went back to the Settlement for dinner. After dinner he had gym classes until eleven o'clock at night. He continued this pace for six months. Added to this schedule was a rapid entrance into his chosen sphere of the New York world. He had met some interesting people and became close friends with Moses L. Ehrlich, a young dentist who introduced him to Santayana, Goethe, and to music concerts at Carnegie Hall.

Then, suddenly, he broke under the strain. He had badly overworked himself, and he had a serious breakdown. For a day or two he was in a semi-coma. One or two people thought he had actually lost his mind, but he said that all was there except he could not do much with his body. It seemed disconnected. He managed to pull himself together, fasted for a few days, and went on a diet of milk and orange juice. He began to feel better, but was encouraged to see a nerve specialist who told him he had exhausted one or another of his glands and recommended a series of injections. Toomer refused the specialist's treatment and continued his own methods. He decided to go to a mountain place in Ellenville, New York, in the dead of winter, and the people from the Settlement gave him two months' salary even though he told them that he would not return to the

job. Having developed a close bond of friendship, they paid him just the same.

At the mountain place in Ellenville, he continued his dieting and recovered completely from his breakdown. Seized by a passion for writing, he obtained a small mimeograph and made copies of what he had written. He sent copies to his friends in New York, Washington, and Chicago. These pieces were long letters dealing with world matters as he saw them. He received some interesting responses, even from his grandfather who often disagreed with him. But Toomer was able to see in his grandfather's response that he was pleased that he had such ideas and was able to express them so well. This made his usual return to Washington a more pleasant one for a while. His grandfather was more tolerant of him now that Toomer was trying to do something with his life even though he was earning no money.

However, in the early summer he went off again with Walt Palmer, a friend of the American College days, only to have to return home in early fall when Walt found a job and left him on his own. For his grandfather this was the last straw. He felt Toomer should at least get a job and settle down to be a respectable citizen. Toomer felt from an inner drive that he would eventually be led to where he wanted to go, but at present his course was as crazy and aimless as other people had made it seem. Even he was getting dizzy

with all his returns and departures from Washington. With no place to go he, only with force, was able to occupy his room in the apartment, a room with his things still in it. This was so only because it was his grandmother's wish. But soon Toomer became weary of his grandfather's reproaches and hitchhiked to New York with only ten dollars in his pocket. There, in the winter of 1919, he took a job in a shipyard as a fitter working for twenty-two dollars a week. This work was harder than any he had done before, and after only ten days on the job he quit.

He had taken this job among the working classes in order to gain the practical experience he felt necessary to his socialist work. It was here that socialism ended for him. He was persuaded by this working group that the working classes lacked the good judgment to appreciate or to deserve his missionary struggles. The men of the shipyard were real workmen having two main interests. They did not share Toomer's idealism about socialism. Instead of discussing socialism, they played craps and slept with women. Socialism, he realized, was for people like Shaw and Sidney Webb and Morris Hilquit. Nothing could be done with these men of the shipyard. It was the way they saw social life, with his efforts as a socialist missionary a disappointment, he retreated to a comparatively gentleman's job with Acker, Merrall, Condit Company, renewed his friendship with

Ehrlich, and moved and lived on the East Side. He began attending concerts in the evenings, and his passion for music rose again, stronger than ever. He was also reading Walt Whitman.

Enslaved by his job at the Acker, Merrall and Condit grocery firm, Toomer could do very little writing. He was only released from it when his grandfather, Pinchback, decided to sell the house Toomer's mother had left him. Pinchback did this in order to get back the money he had lent Toomer on the house. Pinchback was declining financially and needed the money. All of his property and houses on Bacon Street and other parts of town had dwindled to one house, and he was living mainly on the rent from it. Six hundred dollars were left over and sent to Toomer, the house having been sold with his consent, of course. Toomer decided to live off the money, so he quit his job with the grocery firm and devoted himself to music and literature. But in order to become proficient in either, he had to choose between the two. This was a serious question.

While trying to make this decision, he happened to read Goethe's Wilhelm Meister. The effect was tremendous. Toomer remembered the experience this way:

It seemed to gather together all the scattered parts of myself. I was lifted into and shown my real world. It was the world of the aristocrat--but not the social aristocrat; the aristocrat of culture, of spirit and character, of ideas, of true nobility. And for the

first time in years and years I breathed the air of my own land. My God! How far I had wandered from it! Through the cities of America, through colleges, through socialism and naturalism and atheism, through the break-up of family and home, through arid philosophies, Herbert Spenser and all the rest,--and now at last I saw it again. It was like seeing it again, like seeing something you had known long ago but had forgotten. In fact, of course, I was seeing it for the first time.³⁹

This was the effect Goethe had had on him, and he resolved to make his life like what he caught glimpses of in the pages of Wilhelm Meister. For his specialization he chose writing. He would put music aside forever and indeed he did just that.

He spent many hours reading Walt Whitman and all that had been written about him, and he practiced his writing. Continuing this for several months, his money began to run low. Then he was introduced to the literary world. He heard Helena DeKay lecture at the Rand School and made friends with her. He was invited to his first literary party given by Lola Ridge, where he met such people as Edwin Arlington Robinson, Witter Bynner, Scofield Thayer, and others. Although he felt out of place there, he was entering into the cultural aristocracy he had felt he should belong to. He felt he was attending, for the first time in his life, a gathering of people who were his own kind. It was simply a matter of learning to speak their language. As

³⁹Toomer, "Outline," pp. 43-44.

he took it all in he measured himself against those there. There was not a better nor as strong a man as himself, he felt. His literary measurement would be proved later, but as far as life, of experience and understanding of life, of overcoming difficulties, of struggle, and so on, he felt he had as much or more than anyone he saw.

This can probably date the actual beginning of Jean Toomer as a writer, in the spring of 1920. At age twenty-five he had made his first real contact with the literary world in New York. One man stood out at this party among the rest, though Toomer did not know who he was. When he first saw him, he felt there could be something between them, and so it turned out to be that this man greatly influenced Toomer's literary career. It was a week or so after the party that Toomer met him, quite by accident, in Central Park. They recognized each other and the man introduced himself as Waldo Frank. He had heard about Frank through his friend Ehrlich, for he had said Frank had written a remarkable book called Our America. That was all Toomer knew. Toomer felt that they would be good friends as he told Frank about his music and his writing. Frank offered to make some introductions in the music field, but Toomer informed him that he had chosen to write. Toomer was returning to Washington, so Frank told him to write to him whenever he felt he could be of help, though at the moment

there was nothing he could do. Toomer concluded that he could count on Frank and trusted him.

Convinced that he had found his true direction in life, Toomer returned home to Washington to live until his literary work lifted him out. He had decided to force his grandfather not only to accept him, but to give him a five dollar per week allowance and stay there until he had proven himself as a writer. His grandfather gave in, for his age and feebleness were no match for Toomer's strength and singleness of determination. First, he was going to help himself, but at the same time everyone, including his grandfather, was going to help him.

Thus, in the summer of 1920, after five years of wandering all over America, he came to comparative anchorage in the apartment with his grandparents. He spent the next year working at Howard Theater and preparing himself for a career as an author.⁴⁰ He read widely and extensively: Waldo Frank, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Flaubert, Baudelaire, Sinclair Lewis, Theodore Dreiser, American poets, Coleridge, Blake, Pater, Freud, Buddhist philosophy, Eastern teachings, occultisms, the Bible, Robert Frost, Sherwood Anderson, Dial, Poetry, Liberator, The Nation, The New Republic. But these were years spent with two people aging and depending greatly on him for their care. His grandparents had aged

⁴⁰Turner, p. 11.

while he had matured, and he was filled with a purpose that kept him working for the next three years. He describes these as "terrible years."

During a period beginning in 1920, Toomer watched his grandfather gradually decline, and one day he broke. After that he was a decrepit old man, not dying, not living, yet hanging on. Toomer had to take over all his affairs and run the house, since his uncles Bismarck and Walter had their own work to do. His grandmother also became very feeble and spent much time in bed, but Toomer recalled that her mind became sharper and also her tongue. She showed a vein of humor and satire that delighted and amazed all who came in to visit. Toomer's attention, then, was divided between the house, his grandparents, and his own work. He was doing quite a bit of reading, as mentioned previously, and at the same time he was writing, working on various forms such as essays, articles, poems, short stories, reviews, and a long piece somewhere between a novel and a play. Most of what he wrote, and he wrote literally a "trunk full," was not spontaneous, but will and sweat. And yet, not a thing he had written satisfied him nor did he think it merited publication.

Although at times he became depressed and almost despairing over what he had written, he still became more and more convinced that he had "the real stuff" in him. It

was only after several years that he suddenly found the door opened to him and found himself, without a doubt, inside. Toomer wrote in the "Outline," that he knew literature and that gave him great joy. But many things happened before this great joy came to him.

People had begun to wonder about what he was doing and called him "a very queer fellow." He had lost contact with many of his old friends. His Uncle Bismarck became ill, and he took over his household. While his uncle took a month to recover, Toomer was gradually becoming more and more drained. Meanwhile, he came in contact with a new body of ideas--Buddhist philosophy, the Eastern teachings, occultism, theosophy. The ideas he extracted from what he called poorly written books seemed among the most extraordinary he had ever heard. His interest in these ideas was strong, and he naturally was challenged and stimulated by them. Compelled to know more about them, he dropped his own literature and plunged into this kind of reading. Becoming dissatisfied with the readings and the exercises he had tried, he concluded that none of that was for him. So he came back to earth and to literature and left behind this exploration and adventure into other worlds.

Yet, all of this had not been in vain, for he had profited in many ways by his excursion from his literary purpose. The ancient scriptures had been brought to his

attention, he had read the Bible as if it were a new book, and his religious nature, given a cruel blow by Clarence Darrow and naturalism and atheism, had been vigorously aroused. He found that his religious nature had not been destroyed by Darrow, or naturalism, or atheism, but simply had been put to sleep.

Toomer felt that after this period he realized his picture and ideal of man, of a complete and whole individual who was able to function physically, emotionally, and intellectually. When he totally immersed himself in the craftsman's aspect of literature, it became his whole world again as never before; and his religious feelings and his ideals of man gradually became a part of his subconscious.

Thus, once again, he was reading only literary works. The materials he was reading, such as Robert Frost, Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio, and the poems of the imagists, he felt were the tools necessary for his own creation.

He remembers reading once many books on race and the race problems in America and concluded that the contents of these books were nonsense. Having lived in both the white and colored worlds, and viewing the matter from both sides, he further concluded these writers had little or no experience of the matters about which they wrote. "Their pages showed little more than strings of words expressive of

personal prejudices and preferences."⁴¹ Feeling he should write about the matter himself, he wrote a poem called "The First American," the idea being that here in America we are in the process of forming a new race, that he was one of the first conscious members of the race.

All of this took place between the summer of 1920 and the spring of 1922. During this period, Toomer had literally drained himself of energy. His own work, caring for his grandparents and his uncle, and being isolated in the apartment had brought him to a severe crisis in his own life. Organically, nothing was the matter with him, but he was utterly exhausted. He needed a vacation, but there was no money, and then there were his grandparents to be cared for. However, in desperation that summer he managed to get enough money for a week's trip to Harper's Ferry and was able to make arrangements for an old woman to come in and care for his grandparents. He returned with a small store of force, but soon he found himself in the same condition as before. The situation was steadily growing worse, and he felt caught and trapped. He felt as if he were almost at his last breath.

Fortunately, a man came to town and offered him a job as principal of an industrial and agricultural school for Negroes in Sparta, Georgia, a city in northern Georgia.

⁴¹Toomer, p. 56.

He had always wanted to see the heart of the South, and this was his chance. He took the job, however, mainly as a desperate means of getting out of his present situation. Having his grandfather sent to a hospital and hiring a woman to come in and care for his grandmother, he was off.

He arrived in Georgia still feeling terribly drained, but the shock of the South kept him going. In a little shack off the side of the village he began to feel the effects of this crude, but strangely rich and beautiful setting. A black, country Negro family moved into a shack not far from him, and it was from them that he first heard the folk songs and the spirituals. He found them rich, joyous, and beautiful, but the Negroes of the town objected to them, calling them "shouting." "So I realized with deep regret, that the spirituals, meeting ridicule, would be certain to die out. With Negroes also the trend was towards the small town and then towards the city--and industry and commerce and machines. The folk-spirit was walking in to die on the modern desert. That spirit was so beautiful. Its death was so tragic."⁴² It is the same feeling that he put into Cane (at this point unpublished). He says, "Cane was a swan-song. It was a song of the end. And why no one has seen and felt that, why people have expected me to write

⁴²Ibid., pp. 58-59.

a second and third and a fourth book like Cane, is one of the queer misunderstandings of my life."⁴³

Upon his return to Washington in late November of that year, he had his grandfather brought home and resolved to care for him until the end. That he did. He died the day after Toomer had finished the first draft of "Kabnis," the long semi-dramatic closing piece of Cane. It was only during his grandfather's last days that Toomer realized what he had meant to him. He recalls: "I knew and realized all he had done for me. Our almost life-long struggle and contest was finished, and all my love and gratitude for the once so forceful and dominant but now so broken and tragic man came to the fore."⁴⁴

P. S. B. Pinchback was buried in New Orleans by Toomer and his Uncle Walter. He was buried in the family vault beside the remains of Toomer's mother. Toomer's grandmother held up very well, and the two of them returned to living in the apartment.

Settling down once again to constant literary productivity, he wrote materials that he felt worthy to be sent to magazines. The Double Dealer of New Orleans was the first to accept; The Liberator and various literary reviews all over the country became interested in his work. It was

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 59.

not until then that he called Waldo Frank, who read his selections, praised them, and offered to take Toomer's book to a publisher when he had it in shape. When the book was ready, Toomer sent it to Liveright. In time, Toomer received a telegram of acceptance. No one was more thrilled than his grandmother, and she only regretted that his grandfather had not lived to see his accomplishment.

Toomer decided no one else was to do the introduction to Cane except Waldo Frank. Waldo Frank took a trip with Toomer to the South, the Carolinas. Appreciating the artist in Toomer, Frank did not understand Toomer's racial position. Besides, he believed Liveright wanted the book to go as by a Negro author, for this might increase sales of an intrinsically not very saleable book. When Toomer received Frank's introduction, he was disappointed but could not take issue against a man who had responded to the art of Cane so finely and fully. So, he resolved that to be called a Negro would not change him in the least and let the introduction go ahead as was written. This ends a period of spiritual death and rebirth in Washington which lasted three years.

However, with his new step into the literary world of Waldo Frank, Gorham Munson, Kenneth Burke, Hart Crane, Josephson, Cowley, Paul Rosenfeld, Van Wyck Brooks, and Robert Little, he lived on Gay Street and entered into the

swing of it. But his "birth" came when he went to visit Waldo Frank at Darien, Connecticut, and met his wife Margaret Naumberg. He felt the whole world revolve, the deepest center of his being awoke to consciousness, and he gained a knowledge of himself and an awareness of the world which transcended even his dreams of high experience.

In the fall Cane came out and had a fine reception. Once again he was back in New York after a trip to the Ellenville Mountains, reading Plato and Spinoza. He saw the men and women of the literary world grow into lopsided specialists of one kind or another, and he realized that neither literature nor art did anything for him. He was beginning to turn his attention from the books and paintings to the people who produced them. It was they who mattered. For him, everything was chaos, so much so that he got the reputation for being "a sort of genius of chaos." Out of this he formulated two maxims. One of them contained the idea that, "In a sick world, it is first the duty of the artist to get well." The other ran, "The forming of a man is more important than the forming of a book."⁴⁵

During the fall he wrote down all his ponderings and was less concerned with what was happening to Cane. He was able to formulate precisely what he was searching for: "A method, or way of living, for producing the threefold and

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 63.

all around development of man. The idea that man is composed of body, emotions, and mind, and that normal living should provide means for adequate functioning of these three parts, was my dominant idea."⁴⁶ The vision was the one and only important thing in the world to him, not excluding Margaret Naumberg. She, of course, agreed with him and drew supporting data from her own experiences with her experimental school, with educators, and psychoanalysts.

What one sees in Toomer is a seriously confused young man who was not satisfied with being average. He wanted to lead, guide, instruct, and dominate. He continuously studied. He did not stop his studies because he had mastered them, but because he had lost interest in them. He had discontinued his music because he decided he could not become a master. He continuously searched for permanent interest. The pattern of his life search is clear.

⁴⁶Ibid., pp. 63-64.

CHAPTER III

CRITICAL ESTIMATES OF TOOMER'S SEARCH FOR IDENTITY THROUGH HIS ARTISTRY

Cane, first published in 1923 by Boni and Liveright, is Jean Toomer's first book-length work. The first edition carried a foreword by Waldo Frank, to whom the third section of the novel is dedicated. The second printing of Cane with Boni and Liveright's imprint was in 1927, and a third one was in 1967 with the imprint of the University Place Press, New York. In 1969, Harper and Row published a paperback edition with an introduction by Arna Bontemps. For many years the demand for the novel was very small; therefore, only a few copies were printed of the first two editions. Current interest in Negro literature occasioned the paperback edition. When this publication appeared, Toomer was considered to be one of the most promising young artists in America. Cane has been the subject of criticism but not because of its popularity. Critics have found it, even from the beginning, a uniquely interesting work. It is unique in its portrayal of the phases of Negro life, for previous literary treatments of such phases had not been as authentic

and extensive as Toomer's work. Certainly critics' interest in the novel has been extensive, as criticisms of Toomer's artistry in this survey of criticisms reveal; but while critics are constantly interpreting the work, it remains obscure. Cane's style is magnificent, while its structure is puzzling; yet Toomer is as much praised for his literary work as he is misunderstood. The different views on Cane's richness and complexity provide a challenge to one who approaches the novel for the first time.

Although Cane is very much praised and Toomer is considered a promising young author, critics initially received his work with a mixture of awe and puzzlement. The first critic to comment on Toomer's work was Waldo Frank who wrote the foreword to the first edition. Frank called Toomer the "harbinger of the South's literary maturity" and pointed out that he had achieved a special significance because his work demonstrated in its style that, as a Negro, he had "complete freedom of the sense of persecution" in his work. In Cane Frank saw ". . . the emergence of the South from the obsession put upon its mind by the unending racial crisis--an escape through sentimentalism, exoticism, polemic 'problem fiction,' and moral melodrama."¹ Frank believed that Cane marked the "dawn of direct and unafraid creation."

¹Waldo Frank, "Foreword," in Cane, by Jean Toomer (New York: Boni and Liveright, Inc., 1923), p. ix.

He felt that Cane was the South. Robert Littell, in his review of Cane, thought Cane was an interesting, occasionally beautiful and often a queer book of exploration into old country but into new ways of writing.² He agreed that Cane was the South, but "not the South of the chivalrous gentleman, the fair lady, the friendly, decaying mansion, of mammies, cotton and pickaninies. Nor yet the South of lynchings and hatreds, of the bitter, rebellious young Negro, and of his emigration to the North. Cane does not remotely resemble any of the familiar, superficial views of the South on which we have been brought up. On the contrary, Mr. Toomer's view is unfamiliar and bafflingly subterranean, the vision of a poet far more than the account of things seen by a novelist-lyric, symbolic, oblique, seldom actual."³ Littell believed that Toomer often sought to be puzzling and profound, and that he accomplished what he set out to do, a trait which demonstrates a control of his craftsmanship. As a literary craftsman, Toomer won the confidence of another literary reviewer, Gorham B. Munson, who wrote, "There can be no question of Jean Toomer's skill as a literary craftsman,"⁴ and later, "Toomer has found his

²Robert Littell, "A Review of Cane," The New Republic, 137 (December 26, 1923), 126.

³Ibid.

⁴Gorham B. Munson, "The Significance of Jean Toomer," Opportunity, 3 (1925), 262.

own speech, now swift and clipped for violent narrative action, now languorous and dragging for specific characterizing purposes, and now lean and sinuous for the exposition of ideas, but always cadenced to accord with an unusually sensitive ear."⁵ Toomer is motivated by a desire to make contact with his hereditary or ancestral roots in the Southland, and added to this purpose is to make a full response to life, a response that is both robust and sensitive.

Paul Rosenfeld concluded his chapter in Men Seen by stating: "Large as is the heralding which comes through him, Toomer remains as yet much of the artist trying out his colors, the writer experimenting with a style. And still, these movements of prose are genuine and new. Again a creative power has arrived for American literature: for fiction, perhaps for criticism; in any case, for prose. Other writers have tried, with less happiness, to handle the material of the South. They have axes to grind; sadisms to exhaust in whipping up passion for the whites; masochisms to release in waking resentment for the blacks. But Toomer comes to unlimber a soul, and give of its dance and music."⁶

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Paul Rosenfeld, "Jean Toomer," in Men Seen: Twenty-four Modern Authors (New York: The Dial Press, 1925), p. 233.

There seemed to be no end to Toomer's search, which in itself has caused a fusion of his experience which would give profundity to his later work. Therefore, Munson believed Toomer's potential literary significance outweighs the actual literary significance of so many of his contemporaries.⁷

Most important of all the favorable opinions of Toomer's work was an opinion given by John McClure, editor of Double Dealer, a small magazine published in New Orleans. Toomer was fully aware of the troubles that might lie ahead for him in publishing his work. He was not only concerned about the reading public but also the boards of small magazines. Although McClure felt Toomer's work to be superior in craftsmanship, he feared that publishing Toomer's work would endanger the circulation of Double Dealer. When he received two of Toomer's short stories, "Fern" and "Karintha," which appear in Cane, McClure wrote to him:

Dear Jean Toomer,

We are very glad indeed to receive your letter, and we are glad to learn that you have been interested in Double Dealer. It is doubtful if you are as interested in Double Dealer as we are in you.

Your account of your descent and life confirms us in the belief that you can . . . become an artist of exception and achievement. We feel a high degree of confidence in your future. The blend of races has produced remarkable literature in the past. It will do so in the future, and the work you showed us three weeks ago seems to all of us not only full of rich promise but of rich fulfillment. It will afford us

⁷Munson, p. 263.

great pleasure to be able to print a manuscript. The things for which we are grateful in your case is your accurate conception of literature as an art. There are so few men in America who even suspect that literature is art. You have a firm grasp on the aesthetics of the language, and with your blend of racial strains, should produce unusual and beautiful things. The social problems, the bitter riddle of progress and "construction" has warped the genius of so many men who have Negro blood in their veins, as you say. You see deeper than the superficial . . . of the races. Your work has the elemental, universal human reach.

"Fern" and "Karintha" are excellent, more excellent than the other manuscripts. We would have been glad to print them, but we were frankly afraid. The bigotry and prejudices do permeate our subscription list to a great extent. Also, there are the guarantors on whom we depend for support. There would have been hostility which, in all probability, would have sent Double Dealer on the rocks. We felt that the existence of the magazine was more important than any single manuscript. Selde would be willing to print "Fern" and "Karintha" circulating in the North largely. The Dial does not need to fear the sort of hostility which we would have to face. If The Dial does not use them, it seems that Broom would.

In the meantime, keep us in mind. Don't hold back for fear of endangering Double Dealer. I am glad to hear that you know Waldo Frank. You have the capacity to surpass him. I have seen nothing of Frank's so good as "Karintha."

I hope that your reference to a period of sterility was unfounded. I feel sure that it is. You seem to be just getting into your stride.⁸

Robert Bone in 1965 ranked Toomer's Cane as an important American novel, the most impressive product of the Negro Renaissance.⁹ He further praised the young poet-novelist's creation of the modern idiom. "Jean Toomer belongs to that first rank of writers who use words almost

⁸ John McClure to Jean Toomer, letter dated June 30, 1922, Toomer Collection, Fisk University Library.

⁹ Robert Bone, The Negro Novel in America (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1965), p. 81.

as a plastic medium, shaping new meanings from an original and highly personal style. Since stylistic innovation requires great technical dexterity, Toomer displays a concern for technique which is fully two decades in advance of the period. While his contemporaries of the Harlem School were still experimenting with a crude literary realism, Toomer had progressed beyond the naturalistic novel to 'the higher realism of the emotions,' to symbol, and to myth."¹⁰ Toomer's Cane appears to be a reaffirmation of the Negro's values when confronted with the materialism and barbarism of white America. Through Negro folk songs and folk customs, he has demonstrated a culture that balances America's materialism. According to Bone, Toomer's symbols form the basis of a philosophy that man's essential goodness, his sense of brotherhood, and his creative instincts have been crushed and buried by modern industrial society.¹¹ These two views point clearly to the mixture of views regarding the themes. As other critics tried to interpret Cane, they gave their views on the theme.

Two critics saw Cane as a religious quest on the part of its author. S. P. Fullinwider interprets Cane as Toomer's religious conflict and his eventual conversion. Fullinwider contends that the key to the understanding of

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Bone, p. 84.

Cane is to be found in his religious experience in life: from denial of God to a final assent. For two or three years, during the time he was writing Cane, Toomer found a new identity-giving absolute in the Negro folk-spirit. However, shortly afterwards, between 1923 and 1925, he found his absolute answer in Gurdjieff's philosophy: a blend of Freudian categories and religion. In 1926, while waiting for an El in New York, he transcended himself "above the body into a world of psychological reality." He called it the "Second Conception." His search was over, and so was his artistic expression, for it became didactic, unconvincing. His work that had been modern in Cane was now smug and dead. In 1940, while seeking to join the Society of Friends, he realized that he had experienced a religious conversion in his "Second Conception." Cane, then, appears to yield to a religious dimension insofar as it is a part of the full cycle of Toomer's religious experience. He had gone from his childhood faith in God, through total rejection in Cane, then back to God. Fullinwider found that in none of Toomer's works subsequent to Cane did he make race a central effort or even important issue. He found his identity in religion, after Cane, and not in race.¹²

Nonetheless, Fullinwider explains: "Before 1926 he had made

¹²S. P. Fullinwider, "Jean Toomer: Lost Generation, or Negro Renaissance," Phylon, 27 (Winter, 1966), 402.

one serious attempt to find the answer to his emotional needs through an identification with the Negro race. The result had been Cane. I suspect that Cane should be seen as the point at which the broad current represented by the aspirations and needs of the Lost Generation touched the current of Negro social protest, leaving a minor monument to both."¹³ Bernard Bell agrees with Fullinwider that on one level Cane is a deeply religious quest. Bell says that Cane is "a book whose search for the truth about man, God and America takes its narrator on a circular journey of self-discovery."¹⁴

Robert Bone has opposing views regarding the key to an understanding of Cane. He notes that Toomer's struggle is not religious, but racial. Toomer's ambivalence toward his blackness was the decisive factor in his life. Sometimes Toomer regarded his blackness as a category to transcend, a limitation to overcome, but at other times, as in Cane, he was inspired to affirm rather than deny his blackness.¹⁵

Another critic, William Goede, sees in the technique and themes of Cane the first portrait of a Negro writer in

¹³Ibid., p. 403.

¹⁴Bernard Bell, "A Key to the Poems in Cane," CLA Journal, 14 (March, 1971), 251.

¹⁵Robert Bone, "The Black Classic That Discovered 'Soul' Is Rediscovered After 45 Years," New York Times Book Review, January 19, 1969, p. 3.

American literature and an illustration of the problems Toomer himself encountered as a Negro writer. Toomer had discovered an appropriate symbol of the Negro writers who hope to stir "the root-life of a withered people." Toomer's hero-writer senses at least the first tentative step upward from the underground and toward a commitment, through art, to the racial experience of Negroes. In the mind of Goede, "Cane represents progressive steps of the young Negro writer struggling for expression and ultimately attaining a renaissance."¹⁶ Added to that same idea, William C. Fischer recognizes "that the black writer, both in his real life and in his literary expression of it, is a spokesman seeking to define himself in terms of an Afro-American cultural experience whose values and style have been consistently suppressed by the dominating mores of the European-American culture."¹⁷ Jean Toomer's Cane is an attempt at such a definition. He achieves this thematic effect by having the protagonist represent himself as speaking directly to the reader, too, using the first person narrative point of view. From a thematic point of view, Goede believes the reader can at best understand the design and movement of Cane. He further believes that Cane does leave the reader with an

¹⁶William Goede, "Jean Toomer's Ralph Kabnis: Portrait of the Negro Artist as a Young Man," Phylon, 30 (Spring, 1969), 73-85.

¹⁷William C. Fischer, "The Aggregate Man in Jean Toomer's Cane," Studies in the Novel, 3 (1971), 190-215.

incredible record of the pain Toomer must have experienced in struggling to express the spirit of the black man in the language of poetry, probably seeing himself in much the same predicament as Kabnis, the black poet-orator seeking out words in literary form to fit the mold of his soul.¹⁸

Just as critics have tried to interpret the themes in Cane, so have they tried to explain the structure of it which was just as puzzling. Donald Ackley has a theory consisting of three factors that explain why Cane has suffered from lack of attention through the years, and structure is one of those factors.

- 1) Cane appeared too early to be caught up in the Negrophile movement and the "cult of the primitive" which coincided with the Renaissance and which swept the American Negro and his literature into national prominence.
- 2) Cane does not lend itself to categorization--it doesn't fit neatly into "the Harlem School" or illustrate the emergence of "the New Negro," or fall into the other common classification which often substitutes for criticism of black American literature.
- 3) It demonstrates freedom from overt racial or social commentary, for Cane was not written to protest or apologize. Toomer is not a Negro who is a writer. He is an artist who happens to be Negro.¹⁹

Cane does not lend itself to categorization in terms of the above number two, nor does it lend itself to categorization

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Donald Ackley, "Theme and Vision in Jean Toomer's Cane," Studies in Black Literature, 1 (1970), 45 & 46.

according to genre. Therefore, it can not be classified as a novel in the usual sense. It contains independent short stories, verse and prose poems, and a free-form play. The parts do not share common characters and the narrator's identity; degree of involvement and point of view are seldom made clear or constant. Time and place are seldom detailed and always shifting. However, if one reads Cane diligently, the reading will show Cane to be fused together by recurrent symbols, images and themes which contribute to a progressively growing view of life.²⁰ Since, according to Darwin Turner, Toomer's "Cane grew from pieces of shorter fiction--poems, short stories, character sketches and a play--not originally written as parts of a novel,"²¹ it can not be classified as a true novel. But because of thematic development through the use of symbols, one can conclude that the work has the formal unity of a novel.

Its generic identity has long been uncertain. David Littlejohn characterizes Cane as "one esoteric work, difficult to grasp, define, and assess."²² Edward Margolies finds it nearly impossible to describe. "At first glance,

²⁰Ackley, p. 47.

²¹Darwin Turner, "The Failure of a Playwright," CLA Journal, 1 (June, 1967), 308-318.

²²David Littlejohn, "Before Native Son: The Renaissance and After," Black on White; A Critical Survey of Writing by American Negroes (New York: Grossman Publishers, Inc., 1966), p. 59.

it seems a hodge podge of verse, songs, stories, and plays, yet there is a thematic unity celebrating the passions and instincts of black persons close to the soil as opposed to the corruption of their spirit and vitality in the cities."²³ Arna Bontemps finds Cane "odd and provocative" and comments on how stumped the reviewers were when they read Cane in 1923. Bontemps describes Cane in this way: "Poetry and prose were whipped together in a kind of frappé. Realism was mixed with what they called mysticism, and the result seemed to many of them confusing. . . . The book by which we remember this writer is as hard to classify as its author. At first glance it appears to consist of assorted sketches, stories and a novelette interspersed with poems. Some of the prose is poetic, and often Toomer slips from one form into the other almost imperceptibly. The novelette is constructed like a play."²⁴ It does not take long, however, to discover that Cane is not without design. Toomer's superb writing has continued to resist categorization, and the book remains an intriguing and enigmatic work, full of meaning and artistic significance. Structure and design can be seen in the relationship of symbols and images to one

²³Edward Margolies, Native Sons: A Critical Study of Twentieth-Century Negro American Authors (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1968), p. 39.

²⁴Arna Bontemps, "The Negro Renaissance: Jean Toomer and the Harlem Writers of the 1920's," in Anger and Beyond, ed. Herbert Hill (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), p. 307.

another and to the theme and structure of the novel as a whole.²⁵

Because Cane was highly representative of the period in which it was written, it reflects a prevailing pattern of thought of the nineteen twenties. This was, of course, the experimentation with form and language that dominated the work of the literary coterie of which Toomer was a part.²⁶ Between 1920 and 1922, Toomer had become concerned with the problem of placing the materials gained from his experiences with the Negro race into suitable literary forms. Upon studying his craftsmanship conscientiously, Toomer recalls these facts about trying to perfect that craftsmanship:

I again got immersed in the difficulties and problems of learning the craft and art of writing. Literature, and particularly the craftsman's aspect of it, again became my entire world, and I lived in it as never before.

And now again I was reading only literary works. This was the period when I was so strongly influenced, first, by the Americans who were dealing with local materials in a poetic way. Robert Frost's New England poems strongly appealed to me. Sherwood Anderson's "Winesburg, Ohio" opened my eyes to entirely new possibilities. I thought it was one of the finest books I'd ever read. Their insistence on fresh vision and on the perfect clean economical line was just what I had been looking for. I began feeling that I had in my hands the tools for my own creation.

Once during this period I read many books on the matter of race and the race problem in America. Rarely

²⁵Catherine L. Innes, "The Unity of Jean Toomer's Cane," CLA Journal, 15 (March, 1972), 307.

²⁶Todd Lieber, "Design and Movement in Cane," CLA Journal, 13 (Sept., 1969), 36.

had I encountered the nonsense contained in most of these books. It was evident to me, who had seen both the white and the colored worlds, and both from the inside, that the authors of these writings had little or no experience of the matters they were dealing with. Their pages showed little more than the strings of words expressive of personal prejudices and preferences. I felt that I should write on this matter. I did write several fragments of essays. And I did a lot of thinking. Among other things, I again worked over my own position and formulated it with more fullness and exactitude.²⁷

It is truly unfortunate that Toomer has been referred to by many critics as simply clever or as a post-Dada experimenter or simply a promising young writer. Clifford Mason says this of Toomer's craftsmanship: ". . . he was to create a dramatic and revolutionary prose in sheer mastery of English fiction as craft and style that has been matched for achievement both in context and technique only once in the history of the American novel, and that work, The Sound and the Fury, was still eight years away from publication!"²⁸

Toomer's work was free of the race-conscious ideals of many Negro authors and free of social commentary. Cane was not written to protest or to apologize. Toomer neither philosophized about Negroes nor made any of his characters do so. The character of Negro life, Donald Ackley points

²⁷Jean Toomer, "Outline of Autobiography," unpublished Ms., ca. 1934, Toomer Collection, Fisk University Library, p. 15.

²⁸Clifford Mason, "Jean Toomer's Black Authenticity," Black World, 20 (November, 1970), p. 72.

out, "informs rather than directs the book. Negro life is the material out of which Toomer creates literature, not the subject which he wishes to bring to public attention."²⁹

Therefore, it demands merit on an artistic rather than racial or social basis. Toomer, unlike almost any other writer, really talks to black people about themselves.

Mason continues in saying, "Toomer saw the triumph and the tragedy that existed hand-in-hand in Black life, and he realized that to overstate either case was to be less than true. The wisdom of the vision, as in the poem 'Reapers,' was not simply a phoenix syndrome, it was a complex and pervasive sweep of all the vast and subtle searchings that make a man a paean even when he himself is at his worst."³⁰

Toomer believed that it was his duty to seek out the beauty that was to be found within the lives of Negroes and to delineate that beauty, but not in the same manner that other blacks had tried. He was dissatisfied with most of the forms other American authors had chosen. Thus, he did not perpetuate the vogue of exoticism which tended to foster stereotyping in the treatment of Negro material, nor did he display primitivism, nor exist as a literary manifestation of Marcus Garvey's "Back to Africa" movement of the twenties.

²⁹Ackley, p. 46.

³⁰Mason, p. 75.

Robert Bone explains that primitivism provided a common ground for a fruitful period of cultural collaboration:

In the sophisticated art centers of Europe and America, interest in the Negro focused around the cult of the primitive. Insofar as it idealizes simpler cultures, primitivism is a romantic retreat from the complexities of modern life. Reflecting the writings of Sigmund Freud, it exalts instinct over intellect, Id over Super-Ego, and as thus a revolt against the Puritan spirit. For such an artistic movement the Negro had obvious uses: he represented the unspoiled child of nature, the noble savage--the carefree, spontaneous, and sexually uninhibited. The discovery of primitive African sculpture and the ascendancy of jazz reinforced the development of this new stereotype.

Like all previous stereotypes, that of the primitive Negro exercised a coercive effect on the Negro novelist. As in the past, the degree of accommodation was astonishing; with few exceptions the Negro intelligentsia accepted this exotic image of themselves. Perhaps they found in primitivism a useful support for the cultural dualism which they espoused during the Renaissance period. In any event, the younger Negro writers were quite carried away. . . . Jean Toomer, perhaps the most authentic exponent of Renaissance primitivism, wrote in a sophisticated vein of the zoo-restrictions and keeper-taboos of modern civilization.

. . . Insofar as the Negro novelist adopted a prose in response to the primitive effusions of the white intellectual, it produced a certain shallowness in his work, and a legitimate suspicion that his novels, like his cabarets, were designed to entertain the white folks. In the long run, however, the Negro novelist outgrew his primitive phase; meanwhile, it helped him to discover unsuspected values in his own folk culture.³¹

Cane is focused on a level somewhat different from that of much Negro literature. It is focused not on the racial or social issues, but on another level where the social and historical facts are accepted as they are given.

³¹Bone, The Negro Novel, pp. 60-61.

"Cane is informed by a desire for reclamation of the racial past, asserts some of the major values of the Negro Renaissance, so that as the problem of identity remains central to black literature, all attempts to resolve the problem demand our attention."³² Cane, then, does have very definite things to say about the social and racial structure of American society, but not in the manner of protest, apology, or propaganda. Toomer has captured in Cane the beauty and the ugliness, the power and the weakness, the triumph and the tragedy of life in America.

Cane is composed of three sections, progressing from a highly poetic form to an allegorically dramatic form. While Toomer was writing Cane, he was also reading psychology and philosophy, which may have influenced the structure of his book. Bernard Bell believes that the three major sections of Cane might be compared to the Freudian theory of personality, an Hegelian construct or the Gurdjieffian triad:

. . . Toomer anticipates the mystical theory of Gurdjieff in that he too believed that man was composed of three nearly independent forces: the intellect, emotions, and body. Toomer further believed that it was imperative for man to synthesize or harmonize these apparently disparate elements. Thus, Part One of Cane, with its focus on the slave past and the libido presents the rural thesis, while Part Two, with its emphasis on

³² John Reilly, "The Search for Black Redemption: Jean Toomer's Cane," Studies in the Novel--North Texas State University, 2 (1970), 313.

the modern world and the super-ego, offers the urban antithesis. Part Three then becomes a synthesis of the earlier sections, with Kabnis representing the black writer whose difficulty in reconciling himself to the dilemma of being a black American prevents him from tapping the creative powers of his soul. Unlike the appeal to logic of an Hegelian construct, however, Toomer attempts to overwhelm the reader with the truth of his mystical theory of life through images and symbols whose appeal is more to the senses than to the intellect.³³

Through this publication, Toomer sought to show the beauty in Negro life. Not only was his concern for the intellectual Negro, but he moved back into the early stages of the Negro and tried to demonstrate beauty in the primitive Negro and the semi-urbanized Negro. This sets the pattern for Cane. The first section of the book concerns itself with the lives of six primitive women of the South who do not conform to the mores set by both blacks and whites for southern Negroes. Not only do these six women portray the primitive woman, but they portray the varying degrees of beauty which was to be found in Negro life when lived close to the soil. Section two moves from the South to Washington and Chicago. The primitive Negro finds many restrictions imposed upon his life in this urban setting. As these critics seek to urbanize the primitive Negro, he finds it difficult to rid himself of his southern cultural roots and can not fully adjust to the restrictions of the city. The circle is complete when Toomer returns his reader to the

³³Bell, pp. 252-253.

South where the results of urbanization are seen. The product is a northern born and educated Negro who returns to the South and all its various pressures. The protagonist returns to the home of his ancestors to enjoy the beauty he believes he can find in the South. However, he finds an environment to which he can not adjust and, consequently, loses his direction. He finds himself full of self-hatred and indolence. Though the sections are all quite different in themselves, the total effect is cumulative.

The next chapter gives attention to the themes in the novel and interprets the sections of Cane as a spiritual portrait or autobiography of Jean Toomer, the young black artist, constantly in search through the self for a national destiny, for a black identity. The black man in Cane is a symbol of a man caught, struggling to be free of life's limitations. So it is the same for Jean Toomer, the artist who happened to be just a little black, in search of his emotional and aesthetic balance, in search of his own identity.

CHAPTER IV

SEARCH FOR IDENTITY THROUGH CANE

Here are the high-brown and black and half cast colored folk of the canefields, the gin hovel and the brothel realized with a sure touch of artistry. The religious fervor of the negro that affords solace of a sort in lieu of his spiritual bankruptcy is present in every page of the book. Here one becomes acquainted with the old negro who tosses "religious fits" on the street corner of some old Georgia town while the morbidly curious population gathers about and applauds in ecstasy. Here is the hysteria and emotional pandemonium akin to it prevalent in the negro camp-meeting; and the superstitions of the negro and his fear of white exploitation and persecution and painted with all of the negro's hitherto inarticulate woe accentuated.¹

Part One of Cane presents six portraits of primitive women of the South, each belonging to some significant force. Carma and Karintha belong to themselves, and Fern, Becky, Esther and Louisa belong to the rich earth of Georgia. All six are sketches of dusky, sensuous and spiritually unfulfilled women. Toomer's portrait of the Negro woman throughout Cane displays a close association of their beauty and spirit with the soil and the sun and their primal roots. His women, all portrayed in sexual terms, feel that sex is

¹John Armstrong, "The Real Negro," New York Tribune, October 14, 1923, p. 26, reprinted in Studies in Cane, compiled by Frank Durham (Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Co., A Bell & Howell Co., 1971), p. 27.

natural, unashamed, sometimes casual, sometimes intense. They consequently give themselves freely, naturally. It is as if sex were an extension of their link with the soil, the fertile earth. W. E. B. DuBois in 1924 called Toomer the "writer who first dared to emancipate the colored world from the conventions of sex. It is quite impossible for most Americans to realize how straight-laced and conventional thought is within the Negro World, despite the very unconventional acts of the group. Yet this contradiction is true. And Jean Toomer is the first of our writers to hurl his pen across the very face of our sex conventionality."²

The first of Toomer's primitive women who live close to the soil is Karintha. "Karintha" is a story of a lovely, innocent, young girl who is full of life. It is a story told by a narrator whose tone is removed and somewhat moralistic about the neglect of the human soul. This story, as are the sketches, is told by a narrator who regrets the vanishing spirit of the Negro race and is nostalgic about aspects of Negro life that are slowly disappearing. Karintha is a precious little girl growing into womanhood. Unaware of her attractive feminine power as she grows into an enticing female, she is the target of eventual corruption. She is corrupted by the responses of men as she

²W. E. B. DuBois and Alain Locke, "The Younger Literary Movement," Crisis, 27 (February, 1924), 161.

experiences life in four different stages. She becomes the sex-object of the dominating and selfish men in her life who defile her exquisite beauty by their impatience and lust. They have no reverence for her beauty and "wish to ripen a growing thing too soon."³

In her early childhood, "Karintha carrying beauty, perfect as dusk when the sun goes down," has held the interest of many men who "could mean her no good." Old men desired her as they "rode her hobby-horse upon their knees," and they prayed to God for youth so that they could enjoy her. "The young fellows counted the time to pass before she could mate with them" (p. 1). The object of physical desire at twelve, Karintha was strong-willed and capricious. Her liveliness was felt by all who encountered her as "her sudden darting past you was a bit of vivid color," and her voice, "high-pitched shrill, would put one's ears to itching" (p. 2). As other children did, she would stone the cows, beat her dog, and fight other children, yet even her preacher thought how innocent her mischief was when he described her as "innocently lovely as a November cotton flower" (p. 2).

³Jean Toomer, *Cane* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1969), p. I. All subsequent quotations cited from this source will be done by listing the page numbers within the text.

Thus, the first image of Karintha is one of innocence, defined in ideal terms. The introductory poem tells of her flawless nature, yet there is a hint of danger that she might be corrupted.

Her skin is like dusk on the eastern
horizon,
O cant you see it, O cant you see it,
Her skin is like dusk on the eastern
horizon
. . . When the sun goes down (p. 1).

She becomes aware of her body when she overhears her parents making love and proceeds to imitate her parents, "for to follow them was the way of God." She lost her innocence when she "played home" with a small boy. Her purity is transformed and is reflected in the second poem. She has fallen into darkness as the sun goes down and her skin is no longer pure. She becomes defined now by the physical world as opposed to the ideal world. Karintha suffused, even as a child, with an almost tangible sexuality and sensuality, suspends herself just out of reach of those who want her. She gives her body to men freely, but remains aloof from them. She can not be possessed because of her vivid attractiveness and the ulterior motives it generates in others. She belongs simply to herself and "the Georgia dusk when the sun goes down."

As she grows into an irresistible woman, she is regarded only as an item to be bought. She is reminded by the old men that they rode her hobby-horse upon their knees

a few years back, but "she only has contempt for them." The young men go off to make money for her, for "they all want to bring her money." She asks for one thing and they offer her another. She has grown to know carnality and their insistence is upon innocence. They do not understand why she has never given her soul in return. But now Karinthia has given birth to a child in the forest on a bed of pine needles, "smooth and sweet." The unwanted child is a sign of how men have corrupted her purity and innocence, and the narrator, not being very specific, alludes to her destruction of her child: "A child fell out of her womb onto a bed of pine-needles in the forest. Pine-needles are smooth and sweet. They are elastic to the feet of rabbits. . . . A sawmill was nearby. Its pyramidal sawdust pile smouldered. It is a year before one completely burns. Meanwhile, the smoke curls up and hangs in odd wraiths about the trees, curls up, and spreads itself out over the valley. . . . Weeks after Karinthia returned home the smoke was so heavy you tasted it in water" (p. 4). Perhaps the smoke is symbolic of her guilt, for Karinthia destroys the product of a corruption of innocence by the men who exploit her. She feels forsaken and does not wish her child to grow up in the world she has come to know.

She has lost her innocence because of the insensibility of the men who did not know the soul of her

was a growing thing "ripened too soon." She is the target of the selfish needs of men who exploit her. These men have the potential for fulfilling the physical and spiritual needs of Karintha, but because of "man's inability to communicate and interact with fellow humans; the inability to understand and therefore to love; the inability to quicken another human soul,"⁴ they do not. This is one instance of the diminishing vitality of the "soul of slavery." The white man, though not mentioned in the sketches, has robbed the black man of his ability to fulfill the needs of his woman causing his efforts to culminate in death, both physically and spiritually. The story emphasizes the corruption of a young, beautiful female, the desecration of a premature soul by male insensitivity. Karintha, at age 20, has become much more complex and is defined in terms of both the ideal and the real. By the time the poem is repeated a third time, all the images of Karintha remain, but she is not quite the same as described the first time:

Her skin is like dusk on the eastern
 horizon,
 O cant you see it, O cant you see it,
 Her skin is like dusk on the eastern
 horizon
 . . . When the sun goes down
 Goes down . . . (p. 5).

⁴Patricia Watkins, "Is There a Unifying Theme in 'Cane'?", CLA Journal, 15 (March, 1972), 305.

Through Karintha, Toomer has presented a strange image of the potential value and beauty that remains vibrant and vital even in the face of distortion and dissipation. "November Cotton," a companion poem to "Reaper" and "Karintha" is the best description of this belief of potential value and beauty in the midst of destruction and decay:

Boll-weevil's coming, and the winter's cold,
 Made cotton-stalks look rusty, seasons old,
 And cotton, scarce as any southern snow,
 Was vanishing; the branch, so pinche'd and slow,
 Failed in its function as the autumn rake;
 Drouth fighting soil had caused the soil to take
 All water from the streams; Dead birds were found
 In wells a hundred feet below the ground--
 Such was the season when the flower bloomed.
 Old folks were startled, and it soon assumed
 Significance. Superstition saw
 Something it had never seen before:
 Brown eyes that loved without a trace of fear,
 Beauty so sudden for that time of year (p. 7).

She is as the cotton flower that blooms in a hostile environment. Bowie Duncan sees the cotton flower blooming as does Karintha, out of a seemingly fallen condition. That is, the triumph of the cotton flower over the season is as complete as Karintha's triumph over her fall.⁵

Becky, a white woman who had two Negro sons, is the second of Toomer's primitive women. In "Becky" Toomer

⁵Bowie Duncan, "Jean Toomer's Cane: A Modern Black Oracle," CLA Journal, 15 (March, 1972), 326.

"dramatizes the South's conspiracy to ignore miscegenation."⁶ America was, and still is, characterized by opposition to race mixing and, therefore, this story is underlined with the issue of the tangle of psycho-sexual taboos. No black man was to mate with a white woman, and, though no lynching occurs in "Becky," certainly that would have been the case had the fathers of Becky's boys stayed in town. Becky must bear the burden of society's ideas about miscegenation, and the "sons are tangible signs of the ghost of miscegenation that haunts the town's mutual guilt and shame."⁷ She is the creator of the world of rejection in which she lives, but more significantly, she is the victim of the hypocrisy of white and black men alike. Both groups have ostracized her but desperately attempt to be charitable by secretly bringing food and building her cabin. "The railroad boss said not to say he said it, but she could live, if she wanted to, on the narrow strip of land between the railroad and the road. John Stone, who owned the lumber and bricks, would have shot the man who told he gave the stuff to Lonnie Deacon, who stole out there at night and built the cabin" (p. 9). In actuality, there could be no charity, simply

⁶Robert Bone, The Negro Novel in America (1965; rpt. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1973), pp. 82-83.

⁷Donald Ackley, "Theme and Vision in Jean Toomer's Cane," Studies in Black Literature, 1 (1970), 45.

furtive attempts to conceal the existence of the reprobate woman. The "ground islandized between the road and the railroad tracks" (p. 9) only represents the narrowness of the minds of the townspeople. Patricia Chase in her article on the women in Cane sees Becky as "the mirror within which they must see their own narrowness and cruelty. . . . And it is interesting that in the face of rejection and ostracism, Becky chooses to stay in this rural Southern town while it is the people of the community who really flee from Becky, who holds the mirror of their weaknesses."⁸ She is reality in the face of absurdity.

The men build her a cabin between the road and the railroad tracks, but never do they speak of her existence. After Becky's second son is born, she is regarded as dead: "But nothing was said, for the part of man that says things to the likes of that had told itself that there was a Becky, that Becky now was dead" (p. 10). Becky is rendered physically and spiritually invisible by the townspeople: "No one ever saw her" (p. 9). Becky, however, seems determined to live. After her sons shot up two men and left town, the townsfolk realized she was still alive: "Becky? Smoke curled up from her chimney; she must be there" (p. 11). She had managed to survive the rejection and isolation long

⁸Patricia Chase, "The Women in Cane," CLA Journal, 14 (March, 1971), 264.

enough for her boys to grow into manhood. This is truly a sign of her strength and the validity of her existence.

The conditions under which Becky's two sons grow up cause emotional tensions about their racial identity, and, consequently, they later become very hostile: "They answered black and white folks by shooting up two men and leaving town. 'Goddam the white folks; goddam the niggers,' they shouted as they left town" (p. 11). It is questionable, according to William Fischer's article "The Aggregate Man in Jean Toomer's Cane," as to how men who have come into being and grown up under circumstances that leave little control over their own feelings could speak to the spiritual necessities of others. Small wonder that Karintha is left unfulfilled in the previous story.

The house which the hypocritical town built soon collapses, for all along it has confined Becky. No longer can she stand under the pressures of the society and its own guilt. Though the house has sustained her, it finally buries her. The narrator has now shifted from a distant third person to a personal first person identity. The narrator and Barlo, who appears later in "Esther," find themselves tremendously affected by the way this miserable woman's life ends:

The chimney fell into the cabin. It thus was like a hollow report, ages having passed since it went off. Barlo and I were pulled out of our seats. Dragged to

the door that had swung open. Through the dust we saw the bricks in a mound upon the floor. Becky, if she was there, lay under them. I thought I heard a groan. Barlo, mumbling something, threw his Bible on the pile. (No one has ever touched it.) Somehow we got away. My buggy was still on the road. The last thing that I remember was whipping old Dan like fury; I remember nothing after that--that is, until I reached town and folks crowded round to get the true word of it (pp. 12-13).

This ending is painfully close to every black person's life, for Becky's house crushing in on her could very well be the oppressive weight of the white society which caves in on the black man. Toomer's sketch of Becky is closer to the experience of human existence than the woman herself.

William Fischer says, "'Becky' ends with the narrator's expression of feelings of terror at having recognized the threatening implication of this white woman's catastrophe for his own security."⁹ The sketch ends with a tribute to the reprobate woman: "Becky was the white woman who had two sons. She's dead; they've gone away. The pines whisper to Jesus. The Bible flaps its leaves with an aimless rustle on her mound" (p. 13).

Carma, "strong as any man," is the third of Toomer's primitive women who shows a striking contrast between unusual strength and her childish, impulsive actions. Unable to limit her desires to one man, she becomes unfaithful to her husband, Bane, who works away from home as

⁹William Fischer, "The Aggregate Man in Jean Toomer's Cane," Studies in the Novel, 3 (1971), 194.

a contractor. Carma, uninhibited physically, emotionally, and sexually, acts out of her own needs with little awareness of her responsibility to others. She rides up the Georgia Pike driving her mule into the forest. "She does not sing; her body is a song. She is in the forest, dancing. Torches flare . . . juju men, greegree, witch-doctors . . . torches go out . . ." (p. 18). There is a reflection of the African heritage and another attempt by Toomer to hold on to an ancestral past that is slowly slipping away from black people. Carma belongs to herself and feels she is free to give herself to whomever she desires. Full of life and a zest for life, she feels neglected by her husband. As a result of his neglect, she becomes the sex object of many men and gives in to both her sexual needs and theirs. She is unfaithful.

The narrator describes the story as a "crude melodrama," with its sensational action, extravagant emotions, stereotyped characters. Carma's husband worked away from home as a contractor, and she took other men. When she is confronted with the fact that she has broken the rules of society, she reacts impulsively. In her ferocity she is unable to understand the meaning of taking responsibility for her actions. Though she has proven herself to be "strong as any man," it is ironically contrasted to her childish behavior when she runs into the

canebrake and pretends to have committed suicide. She returns to the primitive and animalistic side of her nature when she fears the responsibility that goes along with one's actions.

The circumstances surrounding Carma's actions are very common to the rural South. Men like Bane, unable to obtain good jobs at home, must venture out to seek better wages. Thus, for long periods of time Bane was away and Carma was left alone with all the needs and desires of a primitive woman. Carma, earthy and sensual, deceives Bane twice--once in her infidelity and a second time when she fakes suicide. Bane in his anger over the first deception shows little signs of real strength. He does not follow her into the canebrake, for he was afraid to do so until he heard the gun go off. And even then, he procrastinates as he gathers neighbor men for a half hour to help in his search for Carma. In his anger at finding that Carma has deceived him again after he has discovered her body and realized her pretense, Bane loses his head and "slashes one of the men who'd helped, the man who'd stumbled over her" (pp. 19-20). Bane, then, is rendered helpless in this situation from the very beginning of the story. First, he is deceived by his wife when his conditions prevent him from remaining home to fulfill his wife's needs, and, then, he is

penalized again by society when, in his expression of hurt, he murders and finds himself in the gang.

Carma does not accept or is not made to suffer the consequences of her actions. Others pay for her infidelity. Carma is left to be confronted with her original dilemma: "Should she not take others, this Carma, strong as a man, whose tale as I have told it is the crudest melodrama" (p. 20)? Carma's sexual desires drive her to infidelity, while her fears of facing responsibility cause Bane to become a murderer and face imprisonment.

While "Son of the Son" relates to the theme and imagery of "Carma," it also relates the narrator's nostalgic regret of the dying spirit of the Negro race. The poem speaks to the narrator's concern relative to the first section of Cane, a narrator who sees Negro life vanishing:

Pour O pour that parting soul in song,
 O pour it in the sawdust glow of night,
 Into the velvet pine-smoke air tonight,
 And let the valley carry it along,
 And let the valley carry it along (p. 21).

Toomer, as the narrator, pours his soul into the song he sings in this poem. He turns to his folk heritage and his past filled with slave memories in order that he might be inspired spiritually. The most significant word in the poem is "son," for the poet is the son returning to his mother just in time "to catch thou plaintive soul, soon gone." He has returned to the land and soil just before the

period of simplicity and beauty declines. He has returned to the "red soil and sweet-gum tree," where there is little grass but plenty of pine trees. He has returned just in time before the sun sets on "a song-lit race of slaves."

In time, for though the sun is setting on
A song-lit race of slaves, it has not set,
Though late, O soul, it is not too late yet
To catch thy plaintive soul, leaving soon gone,
Leaving, to catch thy plaintive soul, soon gone
(p. 21).

Bernard Bell interprets the play upon the word "son" in the last two lines of stanza two of the poem as "a subtle allusion to the Son of God, which in the context of the rapid association of ideas in the poem, stresses Christian paradox that in death there is life. This is particularly true of the slaves and their songs."¹⁰

O Negro slaves, dark purple ripened plums,
Squeezed, and bursting in the pine-wood air,
Passing, before they stripped the old tree bare
One plum was saved for me, one seed becomes

An everlasting song, a singing tree,
Caroling softly souls of slavery,
What they were, and what they are to me,
Caroling softly souls of slavery (p. 21).

The last two stanzas celebrate the spirituals sung by the Negroes and demonstrate the power of these songs. The slaves, dark purple ripened plums, express their ripeness through song. Through the spirituals of the song-lit races,

¹⁰Bernard Bell, "A Key to the Poems in Cane," CLA Journal, 14 (March, 1971), 255.

they transcended the hardships of slavery. The poet sees beauty, though tragic, in the old tree, for it is a tree of life of so many slaves gone before him. Before the tree is stripped bare, one plum was saved for him. The tragedy lies in the realization that not only is the slave race dying, but all its ancestral customs are slowly dying, too. Only "one seed" has been left "caroling softly soul of slavery." Mable Dillard says the "one seed becomes an everlasting song" before modern civilization has stripped the slave race of all its simple joys.¹¹ Civilization will rob the race of its simplicity and beauty as they have lived their lives close to the red soil of the land and the sweet-gum tree. But the son has had a chance to return to his past that has nourished him. Late, but not yet too late, he appreciates the beauty of the song-lit race.

The narrator has seen this beauty kept alive in the primitive women, Karintha, Becky, and Carma, and the same is to be said for Fern. So important is the description of Fern that it takes up over half of the story. Fern, a "creamy-colored solitary girl" was unsophisticated, yet her personality commanded the interest of anyone who came in contact with her. Her natural disposition showed itself in

¹¹Mable Dillard, "Jean Toomer: Herald of the Negro Renaissance," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Ohio University, 1967, p. 40.

her conversation as she answered only with 'yassur' or 'nassur' to whatever was said to her. Face flowed into her eyes. Flowed in soft cream foam and plaintive ripples, in such a way that wherever your glance may momentarily have rested, it immediately thereafter wavered in the direction of her eyes. The soft suggestion of down slightly darkened, like the brown color of her upper lip. Why after noticing it, you sought her eyes, I cannot tell you. Her nose was aquiline, Semitic" (p. 24). Mable Dillard concludes that Fern is the product of miscegenation, of a Jewish father and a Negro mother. Her features and complexion suggest the sorrow of the Jewish race and the Negro race as well.¹² "If you have heard a Jewish cantor sing, if he has touched you and made your own sorrow seem trivial when compared with his, you will know my feeling when I follow the curves of her profile, like mobil rivers, to their common delta" (p. 24). She is her beauty, the only gift from life she possesses.

Patricia Chase believes Toomer presented a concept of beauty for its own sake in a woman as he expanded on the quality of beauty.¹³ Fern possessed a mysticism and intellectuality that made men want to do some "fine, unnamed thing for her." Unable to come from under an exterior that

¹²Ibid., p. 48.

¹³Chase, p. 260.

was impenetrable by any who had known her, she allowed no one to really touch her. But men became attached to her and felt a lifetime obligation to fulfilling a need which they could not name. "They became attached to her, and hungered after finding the barest trace of what she might desire" (p. 25). She could not really be touched, for she belonged to the Georgia soil and the cane. She remained a mystery to the men she came in contact with and enslaved each one. Her hypnotic spell, cast by her eyes, fooled them as they said she was easy. "They were strange eyes. In this, that they sought nothing that is nothing that was obvious and tangible and that one could see, and they gave the impression that nothing was to be denied" (p. 24). Through her isolation she places herself above them since it is not possible for them to understand her. "Being above them meant that she was not to be approached by anyone. She became a virgin" (p. 26).

When she was young, she had had men, had known sex, but none of the men had gotten any real joy from it because they could not fulfill her needs. Once they had had her, they felt bound to her, and men continued to bring their bodies to her. Something inside of her got tired of them "I guess, for I am certain that for the life of her she could not tell why or how she had begun to turn them off" (p. 25). Even though she did not deny them, they were

nonetheless denied. Since Fern finds no fulfillment in sex, she is unusual, especially for a woman like her. A stern belief of the Southerner is that the sexes were made to mate, particularly black folks. And yet, Fern found no fulfillment in it.

Hargis Westerfield believes that Fern's rejection of men and her becoming a virgin were associated with her Jewishness. Toomer, Westerfield contends, associates Fern's rejection of the narrator with the Jeudo-Christian experience of the Incarnation. If "Fern" points to the Jewish and Christian myth, as surely it does early in the narrative as well as throughout, then it points to the interpretation of Fern as the Incarnation of God in Mary.¹⁴ Along with the description of Fern in the first half of the story, which is full of allusions to Mary in the eyes of Christians, goes a mystical experience undergone by Fern. The narrator tells the reader of an occasion he had to take Fern for a walk, and as they walked down the Georgia Pike he "felt strange." It was not unusual for him to feel strange in Georgia since he was from the North, but he felt particularly strange in Georgia at dusk. He says: "I felt that things unseen to me were tangibly immediate. It would

¹⁴Hargis Westerfield, "Jean Toomer's 'Fern': A Mythical Dimension," CLA Journal, 14 (March, 1971), 276.

not have surprised me had I vision. People have them in Georgia more often than you would suppose" (p. 31). For example, a black woman saw the mother of Christ and drew her in charcoal on the courthouse wall. The narrator thus prepares the reader for the mystical experience of Fern since, when one is on his ancestor's soil, most anything can come to him.

In the dusk, from force of habit, he takes Fern into his arms. The strange eyes, "usually weird and open," held the narrator. "Held God." In the confusion of the narrator's emotion, he felt he had done something to cause her to fall to her knees some distance from him, to sway and spatter out inarticulate calls to Jesus Christ. Pounding her head against the ground after her Jewish cantor singing, she faints in the narrator's arms. Therefore, in the narrator's efforts to reach her soul, he simply isolates her more and intensifies her pain. Now the reader becomes aware that Fern's needs are spiritual rather than physical. Men are incapable of fulfilling her needs, and not even men in Washington, Chicago, or New York could ever give her what she desired because the northern man has been absorbed into the materialistic and intellectual mores of the city, and that has had a destructive effect on the thoughts and the emotions of black men and women. Thus, like the narrator himself, northern born, they could not hope to sustain or

give her what she desires. She does not desire this "fine, unnamed thing" they hoped to give her. She would never be fulfilled by their bodies or their gifts. They vowed to themselves that some day they would do some fine thing for her: "send her candy every week and not let her know whom it came from, watch out for her wedding-day and give her a magnificent something with no name on it, buy a house and deed it to her, rescue her from some unworthy fellow who had tricked her into marrying him" (p. 26). Fern belonged to the soil and the cane and could not find fulfillment in the materialistic mores of the city. The narrator, realizing his rejection, can not understand why he has been rejected, but he, as she, has been severed from his ancestral roots. And it results that there can be no mutual recognition between Fern and the narrator, the narrator being urbanized, helpless, isolated himself, and self-directed. The narrator, consequently, fails to achieve the communion he is seeking.

Toomer's next portrait is of Esther, with hair that "falls in soft curls about her high-cheeked-boned chalk white face" (p. 36). She lives in solitude--lonely, unfulfilled, with no true identity, neither racial nor sexual. Edward Waldron's study of "Esther" reveals that the story can be interpreted on several levels. On the surface it is a story of a frigid girl who longs for the open masculinity of King Barlo, her subsequent failure to give

herself to him, and her return to frigidity. On another level, which is a personal level closely related to Toomer himself, the story is interpreted as a relationship of a light-skinned American Negro to the black community in which Esther, as well as Toomer, must live and try to function. Still another level of interpretation is the common theme of the Harlem Renaissance, the relationship between the American Negro and Africa.¹⁵ All three of these will be considered in the discussion of "Esther."

"Esther" ostensibly tells of a woman without sexual or racial identity who is "chalk-white" and the daughter of the most prosperous black man in this southern town. She is set above common blacks for both of these reasons and, though she is near white, she is excluded from white society because of her black heritage. Therefore, she is alone, belonging to neither world in mind or color, and, consequently, builds her own world of fantasy. The theme of the tragic mulatto isolated from both worlds from which she is created prevails throughout this story. This theme carries a special power when the writer himself suffers from the same dilemma of racial duality. "Esther" can be read as a search for an answer to the mulatto's plight, yet she never tries "to pass." Though her life is never really

¹⁵Edward E. Waldron, "The Search for Identity in Jean Toomer's 'Esther'," CLA Journal, 14 (March, 1971), 277-280.

whole or complete and her plans are always sketchy and uncertain, she reaches out for a bit of reality of life, personified by King Barlo. She finds in Barlo something she can link herself to, something to give her life purpose.

To Esther, Barlo, who has already made a brief appearance at the end of "Becky," is her deliverer. He is a deliverer from loneliness, from bareness of fulfillment, from grayness to blackness, from nonentity to identity.¹⁶ Because Esther's conflict is an inner conflict, she is seeking personal wholeness through sexual union; and when she confuses sexuality with religious fervor which she envisions in her fantasy of King Barlo, the lusty Negro evangelist, she is deluded in the end. Out of the need for personal fulfillment and solitude, she creates in her own imaginary world a myth about King Barlo. The myth, according to Patricia Chase, turns out to be a stabbing force since it is the myth created that she desired and not Barlo.¹⁷ The partner she seeks is largely a creation of her imagination; and she is shattered in the end when she realizes that he is a man, he is human, and that he is not a myth as she has visualized. Because Esther can not deal with chaos, the narrator presents her personal fragmentation and demonstrates how she becomes mentally dislocated from

¹⁶Chase, p. 265.

¹⁷Ibid.

within. If she had been able to deal with her racial and sexual identity more successfully, she would not have allowed herself to live in a world of fantasy. She would not have stepped out into oblivion.

Frank Durham says that Esther confuses sexuality with religious fervor in her visions of King Barlo, for her well-to-do background and her mixed blood inhibit her natural impulses.¹⁸ Esther, at nine years of age, witnessed this "clean-muscled, magnificent, black-skinned Negro, whom she had heard her father mention as King Barlo" (p. 36), drop to his knees and deliver a sermon while in a religious trance. He left a great impression on Esther then: "He left his image indelibly upon the mind of Esther. He became the starting point of the only living patterns that her mind was to know" (p. 40). The religious fervor left an impression which made Esther believe she could love such a man, and added to her fantastic impression were stories told to her years later about the experience: "Years afterwards Esther was told that at the very moment a great, heavy, rumbling voice actually was heard. That hosts of angels and of demons paraded up and down the streets all night. King Barlo rode out of town astride a pitch-black bull that had a glowing gold ring in its nose. And that old Limp Underwood, who hated niggers, woke up next morning to find

¹⁸Duncan, p. 6.

he held a black man in his arms" (pp. 39-40). Small wonder, then, that Barlo "became the starting point of the only living patterns that her mind was to know."

At sixteen, though she still dreams, her maternal instincts awaken. She dreams of a sexual union with Barlo whereby an immaculate child is born that she loves "frantically." This imaginary union gives Esther comfort in which she finds the peace she has been seeking in her dream. Christine Innes sees this dream-union as Toomer's effort to emphasize the theme of the fusion of opposites, to stress contrast between Barlo and Esther.¹⁹ Esther has "soft curls about her high-cheek-boned chalk-white face," looking "like a white child, starched, frilled" (p. 36), and Barlo has a "smooth black face," and at his full height "he is immense. To the people he assumes the outlines of his visioned African" (pp. 37, 40). Nonetheless, she dreams of their union and out of her neurotic immaculate conception comes a baby frantically loved by her. She has become the black madonna, who, in her dream, has rescued a baby from an imaginary fire. "She alone is left to take the baby in her arms. But what a baby! Black, singed, woolly, tobacco-juice baby--ugly as sin. Once held to her breast,

¹⁹Catherine Innes, "The Unity of Jean Toomer's Cane," CLA Journal, 15 (March, 1972), 311.

miraculous thing: its breath is sweet and its lips can nibble. She loves it frantically" (p. 41).

At age twenty-two, she works in her father's grocery store and forgets she is near white. She is neither attracted to or attractive to men and therefore avoids them. Somehow men do not appeal to her. "She recalls an affair she had with a little fair boy while still in school. It had ended in her shame when he as much as told her that for sweetness he preferred a lollipop. She remembers a salesman from the North who wanted to take her to the movies that first night he was in town. She refused, of course. And he never came back having found out who she was" (p. 42). So she thought nothing about men at twenty-two, but she still thinks of Barlo. She thinks of all the glories he possesses: "Black. Magnetically so. Best cotton picker in the country, in the state, in the whole world for that matter. Best man with his fists, best man with dice, with a razor. Promoter of Church benefits. Of Colored fairs. Vagrant preacher. Lover of all the women for miles and miles around" (pp. 42-43). Esther, never having loved before, decides she loves Barlo, for she vaguely senses that life is slipping by. When he does return, she will tell him of her love, regardless of what people might say.

In addition to linking herself to Barlo sexually through the religious fervor of his vision, Esther links

herself to his "Blackness" as she witnesses Barlo's visionary trance. Edward Waldron believes that Esther found a solidity in his blackness that appealed to her, even at nine years old. Later she dreams of having Barlo's black baby by immaculate conception and in it finds comfort and peace.²⁰ His blackness is the answer to her loneliness. Furthermore, her attraction to Barlo's blackness expresses a common theme of the Harlem Renaissance, the relationship between the American Negro and Africa. In Esther's search for racial identity, she identified with the representation of Africa that Barlo takes on while in his religious trance. Beneath Esther's individual consciousness lies a search for black or racial identity. She searches for a link with Africa, the cultural mother from which she has come years ago. Barlo's sermon fervently speaks of a vision of an African prototype, the complete man, the aggregate man, strong and with his mind in Heaven: "'I saw a vision. I saw a man arise, an he was big an black an powerful--' Some one yells, 'Preach it, preacher, preach!' '--but his head was caught up in the clouds. An while he was agazing at th heavens, heart filled up with the Lord, some little white-ant biddies came and tied his feet to chains'" (p. 38). The Negroes are in tears while the whites are merely touched

²⁰Waldron, p. 278.

and curiously awed by the sermon. For the Negroes, Barlo symbolizes, as he assumes his immense position, their father-King in Africa, and "he assumes the outlines of his visioned African." He bellows in a mighty voice: "Brothers and sisters, turn your faces to the sweet face of the Lord, and fill your hearts with glory. Open your eyes and see the dawn of the morning light. Open your ears--" (p. 39). Barlo, represents Africa in his vision and the people's vision of him, and Esther represents the American Negro.

Esther's experiences with Barlo when she is twenty-seven and he has returned and her rejection of him reveal the theme of the American Negro and Africa. Barlo returns to town while she is working in her father's store, and she rushes to the door to see him from a distance. Suddenly she is animated by his presence and wishes she might be sharply dressed, sharp, sporty with get-up about her. She realizes that purpose is not dead in her as she visualizes that the loose women at Nat Bowle's place will possess him; it is her purpose to rescue him from the grips of evil. Fully aware of her purpose, she goes to the brothel where she finds Barlo hideous and drunk. She is sneered at by the low, coarse women because she is a "dictie nigger," educated and giving herself airs. She bears no resemblance to the women of the brothel. They giggle and laugh loudly at her when she comes for Barlo and make such remarks as, "So that's how

th dictie niggers does it. . . . Mus give em credit fo their gall" (p. 47).

Esther has now come face to face with reality as opposed to the world of fantasy in which she has lived all of her life. She realizes that Barlo is a man, human, with certain undesirable traits, as all men have. She is shattered by this confrontation with the vulgar reality of Barlo, and she leaves the brothel completely empty. She is unable to relate to Barlo or to the world because her myth became the man. She steps into a world of reality only to find "there is no air, no street, and the town has completely disappeared" (p. 48). Her life had been built on a dream, not a reality, and now that that dream has been shattered her world disappears. The Barlo she sees now is not the representation of African visions and Afro-American legends her mind invisioned. If Barlo represents Africa and Esther the American Negro, then her rejection of his earthy primitiveness represents the American Negro's rejection of the strange, lost world of Africa. Waldron says that this does not suggest that the American Negro is hopeless and without culture. However, "that the search for an identity, when it denies reality in favor of a more attractive and less painful dream, is doomed to achieve nothing. Any man is limited by his realities; the question is whether he accepts them and works with them to mold his own identity,

or whether he chooses to escape reality by chasing after false dreams."²¹ Barlo's real identity, represented by commonplace people with whom he drinks and makes love, is more than she can cope with; thus, she is revulsed and walks into oblivion. Once again, there is no human or spiritual consummation for these characters.²² The blunt male figure fails to respond to the female's susceptibility.²³

If Esther could have shed her concern for race and accepted herself as a human being, she could have lived a complete life in the world of real people. But Toomer himself was unable to ignore completely this country's concern for race. Esther's search for blackness, as Toomer's, might have continued, but its urgency would be lessened by the knowledge that she was an entity unto herself, independent of color, race, or other ties. She could have found a place, a common medium where she belonged and not had to be confronted with the life of emptiness and despair she experienced.²⁴ She could have achieved more through reality.

²¹Ibid., p. 280.

²²Fischer, p. 200.

²³Rafael A. Cancel, "Male and Female Interrelationship in Toomer's 'Cane'," Negro American Literature Forum, 5 (1971), 25-31.

²⁴Waldron, p. 280.

Thinking through "Esther" in light of the previous interpretations, one sees a personal importance to Toomer in the plight of Esther Crane. It is obvious from Toomer's biographical materials that he had some difficulty accepting his own blackness, and that is possibly due to the fact that blackness was, as in Esther's case, of the spirit rather than of the flesh. Waldron says that what "Toomer has given us in 'Esther' is a brilliantly condensed, overpoweringly poignant portrait of a human being reaching desperately for something that will tell her (him) who she (he) is and where she (he) belongs in the scheme of creation. . . . Caught between two worlds, one which she denies herself--a world of mixed-color reality--and one which is denied her--the world of total Blackness/Purity, a dreamworld which can only exist in her desperate mind--Esther finds nothing. She is left in Limbo, with not even a Hell in sight. If Toomer felt this despair himself, small wonder he denied part of himself in order to salvage something of himself."²⁵

The poem "Conversion" that follows "Esther" heightens the meaning of the parable in Barlo's sermon by exposing the Christian deception of substituting "a white-faced sardonic god" for the African Guardian of Soul."²⁶

²⁵Ibid., pp. 278-279.

²⁶Bell, p. 256.

African Guardian of the Souls,
 Drunk with rum,
 Feasting on a strange cassava,
 Yielding to new words and a weak palabra
 Of a white-faced sardonic god--
 Grins, cries
 Amen,
 Shouts hosanna (p. 49).

Thus, the poem like many others in the novel is closely related to the themes and imagery of the sketches connected to it. That is, the poem not only describes the cause for the loss of identity, it identifies the major obstacle in the search for identity.

Though the image is grim in "Portrait in Georgia" which precedes "Blood-Burning Moon," the woman establishes a link between the southern ritual of lynchers and the myths of white purity and black bestiality.

Hair--braided chestnut, coiled like a luncher's rope,
 Eyes--fagots,
 Lips--old scars, or the first red blisters
 Breath--the last sweet scent of cane,
 And her slim body, white as the ash of black flesh
 after flame (p. 50).

These two poems, one dealing with the perversion of religion and the other with sensual beauty, lead into the grim story that concludes Part One of the novel.

Toomer realistically portrays Negro life, showing the relationships of southern Negroes and whites. This time it is the story of a Negro girl who enjoys the rare advantage of having two men in love with her. Louisa's tale, as is the whole of Part One of Cane, is of "woe and anguish, of loneliness, of a beauty and vitality that have become twisted and grotesque and yet remain, holding forth the possibility of spiritual life to the man who can love and accept them for what they are."²⁷ Louisa is loved by Bob Stone, a white man, and Tom Burwell, a black man. The story tells of the fatal competition between the two men, for Louisa does not care to choose between them. There is, of course, a price Louisa must pay for not making a choice, a price which she has not considered. Louisa's vacillation between the two men causes them to fight, and the white man dies from the slit in his throat made by the Negro.

The full moon has been an omen from the beginning of the story and points to the superstitions related to the African background of Negroes who lived close to the soil. The blood-burning moon portends the death and violence that result from the pull of black against white. The full moon, which once symbolized desire, now symbolizes the evil omen of tragedy: "The full moon, an evil thing an omen, soft

²⁷Todd Lieber, "Design and Movement in 'Cane'," CLA Journal, 12 (September, 1969), 41.

showering the homes of folks she knew. Where were they, these people? She'd sing, and perhaps they'd come out and join her. Perhaps Tom Burwell would come. At any rate, the full moon in the great door was an omen which she must sing to" (p. 67).

Bob Stone, the younger son of Louisa's employer, loved her. "By the way the world reckons things, he had won her" (p. 51). His family was at one time rich enough for him to have all the female slaves he wanted, but, according to Rafael Cancel, his "fortune had been swallowed by the modern industrialism."²⁸ Bob Stone now thinks of Louisa as something more: "She was lovely--in her way. Nigger way. What way was that? Damned if he knew. Must know. He'd known her long enough to know. Was there something about niggers that you couldn't know? . . . She was worth it. Beautiful nigger gal. Why nigger? Why not just gal? No, it was because she was nigger he went to her. Sweet. . . . The scent of boiling cane came to him" (pp. 60-61). Tom Burwell, whom the town called "Big Boy," loved her, too. Tom, strong, working in the fields, found it difficult to hold her. Wanting to say something to her, he found it difficult, but finally he is able to express his love for Louisa:

²⁸Cancel, p. 28.

But words is like the spots on dice: no matter how y fumbles em, there's times when they jes wont come. I dunno why. Seems like th love I feel fo you done stole m tongue. I got it now. Wheel! Louisa, honey, I oughtnt cause you is young an goes t church an I has had other gals, but Louisa I sho do love y. Lil gal, Ise watched y from them first days when youall sat right here befo yo door befo the well an sang sometimes in a way that like broke m heart. Ise carried y with me into the fields, day after day, and after that, an I sho can plow when you is there an I can pick cotton. Yassur!
(pp. 56-57)

Though Tom's love for Louisa is genuine, and though he is from the factory town, he can not truly possess her, a symbol of the land. Therefore, "his blackness balanced, and pulled against, the white of Stone, when she thought of them" (p. 52).

Louisa's neglecting to make a choice between the two lovers leads into a web of events which she no longer controls. She has forgotten the pride of men, for neither man wishes to know the woman he loves is with another man at one time or another. Her recklessness can be attributed to her youth, perhaps, but she must realize that at some point the past crashes together with the present. That is, she lives in the here and now of the factory town, dazed by the fact that she holds two men at her command. At the occurrence of violence and death, she is quickly brought back from the indecision of her dream world to reality. She has cost a man his life: "Blue flash, a steel blade slashed across Bob Stone's throat. Blood began to flow. . . . Negroes who had seen the fight slunk into their homes and

blew the lamps out. Louisa, dazed, hysterical, refused to go indoors. She slipped, crumbled, her body loosely propped against the woodwork of the well" (p. 64). But it is the death of Tom Burwell that stands out, for the blood-burning madness of the white mob demonstrates the white man's supremacy. Tom has easily beaten Bob but, when Bob pulls out his knife, Tom slashes him with his razor. Bob is the victor, but ultimately this victory seals his own fate.²⁹ The mob is driven by hate, an evil which has been lurking behind the blood-burning moon:

Stench of burning flesh soaked the air. Tom's eyes popped. His head settled downward. Its yell echoed against the skeleton stone walls and sounded like a hundred yells. Like a hundred mobs yelling. . . . It fluttered like a dying thing, down the single street of factory town. Louisa, upon the step before her home, did not hear it, but her eyes opened slowly. They saw the full moon glowing in the great door. The full moon, an evil thing, an omen, soft showering the homes of folk she knew. Where were they, these people? She'd sing and perhaps they'd come out and join her. Perhaps Tom Burwell would come (p. 67).

Louisa has come closer to a final consummation with Tom Burwell than any of the other women in Part One but, because of the confusion that whiteness causes in her mind, she is finally deprived of this fulfillment. And Tom's manhood only ascends temporarily, and his development into the aggregate man is obliterated as he expresses his full potential. The whites' instigation of a reign of terror in

²⁹Fischer, p. 201.

the South, as Catherine Innes calls it, attempts to destroy the black men physically and psychologically.³⁰ Tom Burwell is lynched by "white men like ants upon a forage."

Louisa, having lost all control over the web of events, can not comprehend the evil that has taken place, the violence and injustice. It is more than she can stand. The price she eventually learns she must pay for choosing to live in a dream world is her sanity. Having lost both lovers, finding herself powerless in the end, she becomes insane. Nothing can ever touch her again, for her withdrawal is to a world beyond the real world. Her song becomes merely a plaintive, empty wail:

Red nigger moon. Sinner!
Blood-burning moon. Sinner!
Come out that fact'ry door (p. 67).

Mable Dillard is convinced that the first section of Cane bears out in a circular structure the nostalgia that is expressed by the poet in "Song of the Son."³¹ This poem is a condensed version of the first section, for into it has been compressed the many themes, scenes, and images of the first section. The first section is primarily an effort on the part of the poet, as well as Toomer, to catch the parting soul of slavery and pour it into song: "To Toomer,

³⁰Innes, p. 311.

³¹Dillard, p. 62.

that soul is the essence of the American Negro, the spiritual experience that corresponds to the physical captivity, degradation, and exploitation of a people; it is the sum total of the life that has encompassed the Negro in America and it is made up of all the individual experiences of life."³²

Thus, Toomer has filled the first section of Cane, which portrays six primitive women, with examples of the rich lives, full of beauty and lives full of sordidness, inhibitions and racial restrictions. This section convincingly demonstrates that, as Toomer observed Georgia, he found life more beautiful for those people who lived close to the soil than for those who did not. The six primitive women, living close to the soil, portrayed the varying degrees of beauty and fullness of life; and they pointed toward nostalgic memories of the dying aspects of the song-lit Negro race.

Into Part One of Cane, Toomer had poured the parting soul in the poems and stories of Negro life in the rural South. That the soul is parting indicates that something, some force, must be driving it out. Though this force, which Toomer believed to be the white soul, is strongly felt in Part One, it is clearly seen in Part Two of Cane.

³²Ackley, p. 49.

Because the Negro slowly loses contact with the soil, his dying black soul easily gives way to the white soul. For Toomer, according to Donald Ackley, "the white soul is distinguished by whiteness as much as by life style which has left modern Western man materialistic, mechanistic, and emotionally impotent; the black soul, by contrast, as a result of the slave experience in America, is still free, natural, untrammelled, and ultimately human. The nature of the life the two groups lead, not the nature of their race, determines the nature of their souls. Thus it is that the black man can and does take on an increasingly 'white' soul."³³

This section continues its concentration on the black man, but Toomer has moved the scene from the rural South to Washington and Chicago. He maintains an interest in the primitive vitality of the Negro, but his emphasis is on the rapid repression and distortion of their traits by the materialism of the city. Here is a demonstration of a more subtle urban destruction by means of cultural assimilation than was seen in Part One. Here the city acts as a counterpoint to the rural South where the Negroes are very far removed from their ancestral roots and traditions. Here are stories and poems that reflect the sterility of

³³Ibid., p. 51.

black men and women who lack a sense of their heritage, who are trying to live with their minds the kind of life that the dominant group dictates. Todd Lieber sees the black souls divorced, soon to lie buried underneath northern urbanization. This section, he continues, is dominated by two controlling themes: (1) the divorce of mind from body and body from soul in the spiritually stifling environment of the North; and (2) the result of this divorce, which is conveyed through images of burial and spiritual death. Having been cut off from their roots, they lack a sense of their heritage.³⁴ Part Two, then, demonstrates a society in which very little is left of that spontaneous naturalness seen in Part One because the Negroes have turned their backs to the soil and built concrete jungles for homes. The real has been replaced by the unreal; and instead of love, joy and human feeling, which was seen in the primitive women of the rural South, there exist only industrialism, materialism, and inhuman things in life.

Toomer, by moving his scene to the fast-moving world of the urban North, which is rendered as cold, industrial and stifling, typifies the life of the whitewashed North. Washington, D.C., in the early 1920's is a much larger and varied scene than Sempter, Georgia, of Part One, and Toomer could not encompass all of it into a few sketches as he did

³⁴Lieber, pp. 41-42.

in the rural South. But he manages to portray isolated phases of city life that depict "the psychic destruction of black people, the quest of subjective consciousness by white pragmatism and materialism in the industrial urban environment."³⁵ The emphasis is on the crippling power of the city itself rather than on the characters. The focus is on how the city sucks in people into its metropolitan flow of living dead. They are stifled and their spirit snuffed out as the streets, buildings, houses, and furnishings contract around them. Negroes are constantly confronted with growing caste snobbery by the educated Negro and by the repression and distortion of their Negro traits by urbanization. It is as if they were constantly suspended between two worlds, one dying and the other thus far unattainable.³⁶ Though Negroes in Washington have preserved their vitality by way of their roots in the rural South, whiteness presses in on them from both sides. The "dictie," as Toomer himself was, especially feels this pressure because, near-white, he most nearly assimilated white civilization. Constantly suspended between two worlds, he vacillates between two identities.

Out of this general frame of reference grow the central symbols of Cane, symbols which Robert Bone believed to reflect the profound humanism which forms the base of Toomer's philosophical position:

³⁶Frank Durham, "Jean Toomer's Vision of the Southern Negro," Southern Humanities Review, 6 (1972), 17.

Man's essential goodness, he would contend, his sense of brotherhood, and his creative instincts have been crushed and buried by modern industrial society. Toomer's positive values, therefore, are associated with the soil, the cane, and the harvest; with Christian Charity, and with giving oneself in love. On the other side of the equation is a series of burial or confinement symbols (houses, alleys, machines, night clubs, newspapers) which limit man's growth and act as barriers to his soul. Words are useless in piercing this barrier; Toomer's intellectualizing males are tragic figures because they value talking above feeling. Songs, dreams, dancing, and love itself (being instinctive in nature) may afford access to "the simple beauty of another's soul." The eyes, in particular, are avenues through which we can discover the truth that people bury in their hearts.³⁷

Toomer's more positive symbols of the soil, the cane and the harvest, Christian charity and love, are experienced in Part One of Cane, but Part Two weaves these symbols with symbols of confinement and burial found in the North to demonstrate a unique contrast. Todd Lieber sees contrast at virtually every point: "The North is cold and passive, the South is warm and full of emotion; sexual sterility and perversion are opposed to sexual consummation, cynicism to faith, transience to endurance, and spiritual death to the possibility of spiritual resurrection through an acceptance of self and race."³⁸ Part One is unique in that conflicts end in arid frustration which only the passion of Part One could soothe. Divine physical relationships are very seldom

³⁷Bone, p. 84.

³⁸Lieber, p. 38.

achieved in this section of the novel. Negro men and women are rendered sterile as the city wedges vitality, brilliance, and natural movement against the stale, soggy, whitewashed wood, concrete, materialism, industrialism and urbanization.

Toomer expresses a clear view of this theme in "Race Problems and Modern Society," for he has this to say about America: "Thus, wealth, and such power as wealth gives, are increasingly considered valuable: more and more men are devoting themselves to their attainment, seeing in them the end of life and the highest goal that life offers. The big business man is the modern hero. The average man, that is, the average business man, is already the ideal, even the idol, of millions of people; and there is a growing tendency for institutions of higher education, physicians, and psychologists to accept and affirm the average businessman as the ideal at which all people of sound sense should aim."³⁹ The effect that this type of situation has on man is tremendously dangerous because "All the while, the inner content of life is decreasing and rapidly losing significance. The inclination of prosperity and the inclination to suicide are somehow compatible."⁴⁰ It is

³⁹Jean Toomer, "Race Problems and Modern Society," in Problems of Civilization, Man and His World, Vol. 7, ed. by Baker Brownell (New York: D. Van Nostrand Co., Inc., 1929), p. 72.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 73.

significantly more disastrous for the Negro soul because he is in direct contrast with this type of world. Part Two, beginning with "Seventh Street," symbolically juxtaposes the white soul to the black soul. It shows just how the essential goodness in man is warped by the restrictions of the northern cities.

"Seventh Street" sets the scene of the North, a transitional piece that describes Washington, D.C. Toomer describes it this way:

Seventh Street is a bastard of prohibition and the War. A crude-boned, soft-skinned wedge of nigger life breathing its loafer air, jazz songs and love, thrusting unconscious rhythms, black reddish blood into the white and whitewashed wood of Washington. Stale soggy wood of Washington. Wedges rust in soggy wood. . . . Split it! In two! Again! Shred it! . . . the sun. Wedges are brilliant in the sun; ribbons of wet wood dry and blow away. Black reddish blood. Pouring for crude-boned soft-skinned life, who set you flowing? Blood suckers of the War would spin in a frenzy of dizziness if they drank your blood. Prohibition would put a stop to it. Who set you flowing? White and whitewashed disappear in blood (p. 71).

The bloodsuckers of the war with their bootlegging, their Cadillacs, whizzing down the street have drained the Negro of his dignity, and he has become corrupted by the white and whitewashed wood of Washington. The Negro is confined by the "shanties, office buildings, theatres, drug stores, restaurants, and cabarets." Seventh Street is the road which leads the Negro soul toward its death.

This new life style claims Rhobert as a slave, for he, like so many whites, is possessed by his house. That

Rhobert carries the house on his head is an attack on the value of private ownership of property, a crucial bourgeois value. Consequently, he is losing the struggle, since the harder he tries, the deeper he sinks into the mud of civilization. The house that Rhobert wears slowly crushes him, symbolic of the weight of materialism on such a human being. Catherine Innes draws a striking parallel between the cabin built by the community to hide Becky and her sin in Part One and the house that slowly crushes in on Rhobert. She sees the house as a symbol of repression and Puritanism, preventing the fusion of sense, emotion, and intellect, and representing a barrier to the open receptivity of Part One.⁴¹ Materialism, then, has completely degraded and corrupted Rhobert:

Rhobert wears a house, like a monstrous driver's helmet, on his head. His legs are banty-bowed and shaky because as a child he had rickets. His is way down. Rods of the house like antennae of a dead thing, stuffed, prop up in air. He is way down. He is sinking as a diver would sink in mud should the water be drawn off. . . . Life is water that is being drawn off. . . . A futile something like the dead house wraps the live stuffing of the question: how long before the water will be drawn off? Rhobert does not care. Like most men who wear monstrous helmets, the pressure it exerts is enough to convince him of its practical infinity (pp. 73 & 74).

Possessed by the house, he works himself to death when, in fact, he should have stayed home in the South with his wife and children. His only connection with his family is in his dreams. At the end of "Rhobert," the narrator attempts to

⁴¹Innes, p. 312.

understand and come to terms with such an enigma by suggesting to the reader that a monument be built to Rhobert and he be called great. Yet, the monument will be set "in the ooze where he goes down" (p. 75), which only adds to the degradation of Rhobert, enslaved by materialism.

"Avey" is another short piece of a woman who has not yet found her place in the city. Having sex too early in life, she has become indifferent to the kind of love the writer-narrator offers her. Because Avey represents her people transplanted to the urban environment of V Street, the first person narrator is unable to understand her. He goes off in pursuit of social prestige, of "civilization," to win Avey's favor. He turns desperately to basketball, swimming, dancing, the University of Wisconsin, and the business world to win her, but none of these things impress Avey. Since Avey symbolizes the fertility of the Negro soul, he has only separated them further. The narrator, in his effort to win her, has risen above her real needs; when they meet five years later, he attempts to rationalize his continuing desire for her with the idea that they are destined for an artistic life together.

Avey's womanhood is unsatisfied by the educated men of the city, and, therefore, the narrator's education accounts for a part of his inability to deal with Avey's womanhood. Unable to comprehend Avey's lack of desire to

better herself, he tries first to change "her downright laziness. Sloppy indolence. . . . Hell! she was no better than a cow when I felt an udder in a Wisconsin stockjudging class" (pp. 82-83). Then he tried to meet her on her own level since he could not forget her, even though he condemned her indolence. He attempts to tell Avey about his plans for the two of them, but he merely puts her to sleep because his words are meaningless. His irrelevant monologues bore her. He pours forth these words:

I described her own nature and temperament. Told how they needed a larger life for their expression. How incapable Washington was of understanding that need. How it could not meet it. I pointed out that in lieu of proper channels, her emotions had overflowed into paths that dissipated them. I talked, beautifully I thought about an art that would be born, an art that would open the way for women the likes of her. I asked her to hope, and build up an inner life against the coming of that day. I recited some of my own things to her. I sang, with a strange quiver in my voice, a promise-song. And then I began to wonder why her hand had not once returned a single pressure. My old-time feeling about her laziness came back. . . . Then I looked at Avey. Her heavy eyes were closed. Her breathing was as faint and regular as a child's in slumber (p. 87).

Words are the inadequate means of communication so often used without result, words which put Avey to sleep. He valued talking above emotional experience.

Now that the narrator can neither know her nor really possess her, he wishes to protect her, so he chooses to explain her to herself. She falls asleep on this empty explanation because, according to Patricia Chase, she has

already experienced life and in her own way come to grips with it. She has seen absurdity, brutality, and hypocrisy and can no longer be wounded by them. Therefore, she feels no need for the narrator's protection because her unconcern for and indifference to life are necessary for her survival. It is the refusal to compete in a competitive world that men misunderstand and resent in Avey. Men seem able to see women only as a self-created alter ego, and, if there is nothing to take and nothing to protect, they are confused about how to react to women. Thus, their perplexity and anger at Avey's indifference and refusal to "play the game" is merely the shadow of their own limited vision.⁴² Avey remains an "Orphan-woman" as the pattern of the sensitive female and the imperceptive male is once again repeated in this story. He has failed to mate with Avey spiritually or physically and can only meditate about her innocence as he holds her in his arms.

The two poems that follow "Avey" are "characterized by the same dramatic tensions found in the contrasts between either the body, emotions and intellect of man and modern social conventions. In an extended cosmic metaphor, 'Beehive' depicts man's failure to develop his intellectual and spiritual potential by associating the mechanical activity of human life with that of bees. 'Storm Ending'

⁴²Chase, p. 263.

captures the insensitivity of man to the awesome beauty of Nature."⁴³

The scene of "Theater" is Howard Theater set amidst nigger alleys, pool rooms, restaurants, and saloons. The two characters are Dorris, the dancer, and John, the brother of the theater manager. Both characters are described as "dictie"; "Dorris. John sees her. Her hair bobbing about her lemon-colored face. . . . Dictie, educated, stuck up; show-girl" (p. 94), and John, "The manager's brother. Dictie. Nothin doin, hon" (p. 95). Though they are both black, they stand on different social levels. They are two people, very class conscious, who can not approach each other because this barrier exists between them: stage people are considered disreputable by this audience. Ironically, however, the audience considers itself to be respectable. Mutually attracted to each other, they can only come together in a dream world since neither can free himself sufficiently to put their desires into motion. Dorris, at least, tries to reach John, tries to express her feelings emotionally and physically through dancing before him; but because John's body is "separated from the thoughts that pack his mind" (p. 92), her efforts are useless. John's mind is whitewashed and melancholy like the North, and Dorris represents the beauty and vitality of his black

⁴³Bell, p. 257.

heritage. He can not love Dorris on her terms because he does not accept or rejoice in his black heritage. He had been whitewashed by the white people, standards and racism of the North where, because of his blackness, his manhood is denied.

John's mind, "contained above desire of his body . . . wills thought to rid his mind of passion" (pp. 92 & 93). His stilted mind is incapable of responding to the natural vitality inherent in Dorris's dancing, and he reacts in a compressed and false reverie of romantic love caused by contracting walls of the theater. He can not act; he simply dreams. Because he feels that Dorris will find fault in him if he releases all the self-control he exhibits, he dreams of their union. The action really takes place in John's mind and, as Dorris unconsciously throws herself into her dance, he dreams of her: "The walls press in, singing. Flesh of a throbbing body, they press close to John and Dorris. They close them in. John's heart beats tensely against her dancing body. Walls press his mind within his heart. And then, the shaft of light goes out the window high above him. John's mind sweeps up to follow it. Mind pulls him upward into dream. Dorris dances . . . John dreams" (p. 98).

The only union that can exist for them is in this dream, but for some reason Dorris expects much more. She

expects John to react to her dancing, to express some physical ecstasy. Why could she not win him since she could have gotten an education if she wanted to. She knows respectable folks in Philadelphia, New York, and Chicago. And she had had men better than John, doctors and lawyers. But, even though John is drawn into her movements and dreams of the gleams of beauty and satisfaction obtained from their imaginary union, "his whole face is in shadow. She seeks for her dance in it. She finds it a dead thing in the shadow which is his dream" (p. 99). John has been unable to merge his mind and body so his dream is an artificial thing, bathed in melancholy, which Dorris can not understand. Frustrated, she rushes from the stage crying bitterly. Robbed, then, of her womanhood, without love, she dries up and is seen only as a dancing doll who gropes in vain for feeling and empathy. The labors of her dance are a means of survival where there is no survival. There could never be a union of the two, and the conflict ends in arid frustration which only passion could soothe, if not eliminate. Dorris has lost her lustiness and robustness, and John is left immobile. He has been unable to bring himself to a spiritual or sexual communion with Dorris, who represents the Negro soul. This failure, according to Todd Leiber, has disastrous consequences for both John and Dorris because the male force is impotent and the female principle is

unfulfilled and wasted.⁴⁴ This inability to achieve fulfillment, spiritually or sexually, is caused by John's separation of mind from the instincts of his body.

"Calling Jesus" is a very short sketch which reiterates the central theme of all the selections in Part Two. Briefly, it tells of a woman who has moved to the North and whose soul is oppressed by the environment. Her soul is compared to a little thrust-tailed dog that always follows her about through the streets and alleys of the city. The narrator says, "her soul is like a little thrust-tailed dog, that follows her whimpering. I've seen it tagging on behind her, up streets where chestnut trees flowered, where dusty asphalt had been freshly sprinkled with clean water. Up alleys where niggers sat on low doorsteps before tumbled, shanties and sang and loved. At night when she comes home, the little dog is left in the vestibule, nosing the crack beneath the big storm door, filled with chills till morning" (p. 103). Her soul can not express itself, smothered in its surroundings, and yearns for the South. Her soul also calls to Jesus for salvation that can be found in the cotton fields of the South, a salvation that can reunite her soul with her body.

"Box Seat," a central story of Part Two, combines symbols of houses with the soil. As Toomer introduces the

⁴⁴Lieber, p. 43.

theme of redemption, he creates a character, Dan Moore, who takes on the role of a black Christ, prophet, savior, militant Messiah. Dan Moore, a Negro writer, as was the narrator of "Avey" and Toomer himself, concerned himself with the mission of the Negro. He represents the southern heritage portrayed in Part One and comes to claim Muriel, the Negro soul, from the restrictions of white civilization. The qualities of the parting soul of slavery are being replaced by the white world which is represented by the "houses," "shy girls whose eyes shine reticently upon the dusk body of the street" (p. 104). The black soul is the potential savior, and Dan's role is clearly set forth in his speech: "Look into my eyes. I am Dan Moore. I was born in a canefield. The hands of Jesus touched me. I am come to a sick world to heal it" (p. 106). Just up from the South, where he has gotten his power of redemption and hope from its red soil, he attempts to rescue Muriel from "zoo-restrictions and keeper-taboos." Her landlady, Mrs. Pribby, and white men's Washington hold Muriel shackled in the northern mode of thinking and morality. Muriel says, "Dan, I could love you if I tried, I dont have to try. I do. O Dan, dont you know I do? Timid lover, brave talker that you are. Whats the good of all you know if you dont know that? I wont let myself. I? Mrs. Pribby who reads newspapers all night wont. What has she to do with me? She is me,

somehow" (p. 110). Thus, Muriel's parting soul of slavery has been replaced by the white world. Now slave to the white society, no will of her own, she has become Mrs. Pribby's property like the other houses she owns.

The central theme of the story is the "essential goodness of man being buried by houses, machines, night-clubs, newspapers, and anything else which represents modern society, that goodness being man's sense of brotherhood born out of toil with the soil and constant battle with nature."⁴⁵ Dan sees the beautiful vitality of black women, represented by Muriel, locked in frames of houses. Stripped of human emotion, she is unable to respond to him. Muriel, trapped between her black heritage and white society, wavers between them, but, tentatively, accepts Pribby. Unable to free herself and return to her native heritage, she runs to the theater where she accepts the farce of life that is called living in American civilization. She seeks a seat at a vaudeville show where the main event is two dwarfs fighting for the "heavy-weight championship." The "box-seat" she occupies symbolizes the bourgeois values Muriel carries within her soul, and the theater (Lincoln Theater) is more confining than the life at Mrs. Pribby's that she

⁴⁵Larry Thompson, "Jean Toomer: As Modern Man," ed. Arna Bontemps, in The Harlem Renaissance Remembered (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1972), p. 59.

runs from. To entertain "the dwarfs pound and bruise and bleed each other, on his eyeballs" (p. 123).

Dan followed Muriel to the theater with the hope still of freeing her from the chains of white civilization. He watches her capitulate totally to the white world. He watches her move into her "box-seat" with her friend, Bernice, who like Muriel is a school teacher. Muriel is concerned about what people will say about her, and as she watches this farce of life staged before her she behaves as she is expected to in public. After the battle is over between the dwarfs, Muriel is offered a blood-specked rose, and when she accepts it, stained by convention, Dan feels he has been defeated by both white and Negro worlds. In her acceptance, Dan sees the destruction of Negroes. Rather than accepting the love Dan offers her, which is a hint of something real, she backs away in fear accepting instead "impotent bravado and spurious sentiment of performing dwarfs of the vaudeville review."⁴⁶ She is thereby encompassed and defined by a theatrical box-seat representation of life. Her body, just as John's in "Theater," has been separated from her soul, rendering her spiritless and void of any communal spirit unique to rural Georgia.

Dan, defeated in his purpose, sees Muriel as hopelessly ruined by white society and realizes that she is

⁴⁶Fischer, p. 205.

still imprisoned by it. There is no longer any reason to fight. Muriel, according to Patricia Chase, wanted Dan, but not in a real and honest way. She wanted him sexually, but was not free enough to enjoy her own sexuality. Therefore, she fantasizes rape and violence, anything but real loving. A slave to convention, she accepts, in place of real love, symbolic grappling of midgets on stage. And for her orgasm, she sees "cut lips and bloody noses." For love, she accepts hate. For sex, she accepts blood. After that, a battered and bloody midget offers her a flower and a mirror in which Muriel can see no reflection because she has none. Yet, she accepts the bloody roses as a mocking memento.⁴⁷ This acceptance frustrates Dan so much that he is crushed and yells in completion of the dwarf's words: "JESUS WAS ONCE A LEPER!" (p. 129). On one hand, one might believe this statement to signify Dan's severance from Christ's world,⁴⁸ and, then again, it might not mean a rejection of white man's Christianity, but rather a reaffirmation in new terms of the true Christianity. To accept the rose from this white anti-Christ, as Muriel does, is to deny oneself.⁴⁹

⁴⁷Chase, p. 270.

⁴⁸William J. Goede, "Jean Toomer's Ralph Kabnis: Portrait of the Negro Artist as a Young Man," Phylon, 30 (Spring, 1969), 78.

⁴⁹Cancel, p. 29.

Dan, then, in his exclamation offers the traditional world a challenge. He has been unsuccessful in playing his role as black prophet, savior, liberator of his people, so he leaves without even remembering the challenge he has offered. Now free of the love he had for Muriel, convinced of her being beyond redemption, he is left impotent and sterile: "Dan steps down. He is as cool as a green stem that has just shed its flower" (p. 129). He has sought love and communication but has failed. He has not been able to free the Negro soul. He finally understands the hypocrisy of civilization and the futility of trying to save it. "This is the portrait of the Negro writer, who is trying something to reduce his chaotic impressions and fears of Negro life into metaphor."⁵⁰

"Bona and Paul" concludes Part Two of Cane and reiterates the denial of blackness by Muriel in "Box Seat." Paul Johnson, so far removed from his cultural heritage, is able to pass for white at a college of physical education in Chicago. Bona, a white girl from the South in search of meaning in life, loves Paul. She is attracted to him because of his blackness, even though he is a mulatto. This sketch reveals the conflict between the two since Paul has not embraced his racial identity and all that it involves. He has also been whitewashed by white society, as he

⁵⁰Goede, p. 79.

embraces the very elements that most effectively dissipate his strength: the established education system and a white woman. Because he is displaced and ambivalent and because Bona is uncertain about her attraction to a black man, nothing much ever comes of their relationship. It is their extreme consciousness that they are racially different that keeps them separated.

That the two are mutually attracted to each other is evident as Bona symbolically dances about Paul on the basketball court, testing her feelings and measuring his: "She whirls. He catches her. Her body stiffens. Then becomes strangely vibrant, and bursts to a swift life within her anger. He about to give way before her hatred when a new passion flares at him and makes his stomach fall. Bona squeezes him. . . . He looks at Bona. Whir. Whir. They seem to be human distortions spinning tensely in a fog. Spinning . . . dizzy . . . spinning. . . . Bona jerks herself free, flushes a startling crimson, breaks through the bewildered teams and rushes from the hall" (pp. 136-137). They, of course, can never realize themselves spiritually or physically since they are so self-conscious about the fact that she is white and he is black. Their lives, and consequently their experiences, have been kept so far apart that they could never really know each other. Society has made them strangers and they have not yet learned to accept

each other as man and woman nor reach out to help narrow the gap between them. Patricia Chase says the gulf is far too wide, from black to white, from man to woman, and from real to real.⁵¹

The story represents the awakening of a young mulatto to a consciousness of his race. Toomer here reveals his plan of the cyclical structure of Cane, for he has formed a complete circle beginning with the awakening of the Negro to his racial dilemma. He writes to Waldo Frank:

"From three angles, Cane's design is a circle.

Aesthetically, from simple forms to complex ones, and back to simple forms. Regionally from South up to North, and back into the South again. Or, from the North down into the South, and then a return North. From the point of view of the spiritual entity behind the work, the curve really starts with Bona and Paul (awakening), plunges into 'Kabnis,' emerges in 'Karintha,' etc., swings upward into 'Theatre' and 'Box Seat' and ends (pauses) in 'Harvest Song'."⁵² In the Crimson Gardens, a white nightclub where Bona, Paul, Art, and Helen dance, Paul has had a vision of wholeness. Paul and Bona dance where they express the passion of their feeling. "The dance takes blood from their

⁵¹Chase, p. 271.

⁵²Extract from a letter from Jean Toomer to Waldo Frank, 1922, Toomer Collection, Fisk University Library.

minds and packs it, tingling, in the torsos of their swaying bodies. Passionate blood leaps back into their eyes. They are a dizzy blood clot on a gyrating floor" (p. 151). They rush out to consummate their love, but the glances from those who watch them bring Paul back to himself, and he realizes his own blackness. The glances of those who watch, and particularly the black doorman, make him realize that he only dreams of his wholeness. He goes back to the doorman to explain to him that he is going out to "gather petals," to know the one he loves. "I came back to tell you, brother, that white faces are petals of roses. That dark faces are petals of dusk. That I am going out and gather petals. That I am going out and know her whom I brought here with me to these Gardens which are purple like a bed of roses would be at dusk" (p. 153).

Yet, Bona, like Muriel, is a prisoner of convention, and, therefore, she leaves as Paul speaks to the doorman. What she thought she wanted while she danced with Paul, she is unable to accept because of fear bred of conformity. She has not yet reached a point of womanhood which would allow her to take what life offers. She flees from what life offers her because the novelty, depth, and uniqueness of Paul's blackness frightens her. Paul's awakening has come too late and, in his excitement, he tries to explain it, understand it, but he loses it. This fusion of the white

and black world is realized, but only temporarily. Paul's discovery of his own blackness has cost him his social ties and his romance, and he is left alone in the end, solitary in an empty world. With this realization of Paul's, which is perhaps a reflection of Toomer's own agonizing search for identity, Toomer has reasserted the search for a communion with the heritage of the racial past of the Negro. Though Paul could finally make that assertion, he could not complete it. Todd Lieber asserts that that assertion can be completed only by a return to the native soil of the South, where the pain and beauty of the racial past continue to exist as an immediate reality.⁵³ Otherwise, Paul's efforts remain empty and impotent.

In Part Two of Cane, Toomer has transformed personal experience into universally meaningful criticisms of life. Like the narrator of "Avey," he had loved a high school girl who was only interested in college men. He had shuddered when his less sensitive high school friends had described in detail their actual or exaggerated conquests. Also, he had attended college in Wisconsin, hitchhiked to New York, had unsuccessfully hunted jobs, had loved a girl at Harpers Ferry, and had tried to change her. Like John in "Theater," he had worked in a theater, and, even earlier led by his uncle, had played stage-door Johnny to older women of

⁵³Lieber, p. 46.

the chorus line. Like Paul Johnson, he had attended a school for physical training in Chicago, undergone the stares of whites whom he thought speculated about his racial identity, and had loved a white girl whose family opposed her relationship with a Negro. These three stories reveal the frustrations of Jean Toomer as he sought for his own identity. Darwin Turner explains that Part Two, when set against Part One, points to a universal thought. Toomer, himself educated, interposed will between desire and action as did many of the figures in Part Two. Consequently, he lived mainly in fantasy and dreams. Thus, the stories found in this section express a regret that a male can not live as instinctively as a female can, and suggest a yearning for a more primitive existence in which desire, not will, can be the ruling force. Also, Toomer unhappily points out that southern blacks were rapidly losing the innocence of Eden because they substituted will and social image for the purity of freedom and naturalness.⁵⁴

"Kabnis," the longest work in Cane, is not merely a further development of the vision of life Toomer saw, for it incorporates much of the two previous sections in a new form, through the use of one major character and one

⁵⁴Darwin Turner, In A Minor Chord: Three Afro-American Writers and Their Search for Identity (Carbondale: Southern Ill. University Press, 1971), p. 23.

sustained story. This dramatic presentation is somewhat self-sufficient; however, it is still as obscure as the first two parts. And a reading of the first two parts is necessary in order for the reader to understand it. Toomer, in Part Three, completes the cyclical structure in Cane, recording the Negro's reaction to various pressures of southern environment. These reactions range from those of a northern born and educated Negro to an old ex-slave, who finds himself completely dehumanized. This section, approaching the problems of the Negro, as it returns the reader to the South does not acutely analyze the issues Negroes faced, but presents the poignant revelation of the feelings of a Negro whose concern is the aesthetic.⁵⁵ The protagonist, Ralph Kabnis, returning home to the South where he hopes to find joy and beauty in the land and the red soil, cringes in the face of the traditions of his heritage. Unable to come to grips with his past, he is filled with self-hatred and indolence.

Ralph Kabnis, the light-skinned, intellectual, northern Negro, is easily the most complex character of the novel. William Goede found that Jean Toomer expresses in "Kabnis" the universal anxiety of modern man, and it is precisely because he is Negro that his experiences formulate, rather than limit, distinctly and honestly the

⁵⁵Lieber, p. 46.

tragedy of all life. More significantly, Kabnis is Toomer's portrait of the Negro writer who is trying somehow to reduce his chaotic impressions and fears of Negro life into metaphor. In "Kabnis" the sexual conflict of the first two parts has been abandoned, and it dramatizes the story of a frustrated artist whose conflict is literally what the sexual conflict stands for. Between the acceptance and limitation of being, the artist's failure to accept life results not simply in the symbolic incompleteness of isolation, but in the unmistakable fragmentation of a crack-up.⁵⁶

Kabnis is a school teacher in Sempeter, Georgia, a graduate of a northern university and an aspiring writer. As the story opens, he is trying to read himself to sleep, but he fears his surroundings. He perceives his new environment as opposed to him. Kabnis listens to the mocking songs of the night winds:

White-man's land,
Niggers, sing.
Burn, bear black children
Till poor rivers bring
Rest, and sweet glory
In Camp Ground (pp. 157, 167, & 209).

Kabnis is unable to accept the Negro's position of ugliness in the midst of beauty; thus, he finds it difficult to

⁵⁶Susan Blake, "The Spectatorial Artist and the Structure of Cane," CLA Journal, 17 (June, 1974), p. 529.

identify with the environment. He realizes that Negroes are cut off from the beauty of the South because the whites control it.

Kabnis seeks encouragement from the other characters but is unable to do so. He feels the restrictions placed upon him as a school teacher are inconsistent; he feels a sense of loneliness in the South; he fears lynching. His fears and restrictions dampen his spark of lyrical expression, and he finds himself unable to write what he feels. He is unable to animate his vision; he can not, in Kabnis's words, fit the artist's soft-faced dream to the bull-necked Negro experience. His art is unable to tame Negro life, to transcend and so to affirm its vitality.⁵⁷ Kabnis feels uneasy about being a Negro and a writer; yet, he knows he must live and write. As he turns to Halsey, who has not been crushed by southern life but absorbed into it, he rejects him. Halsey is a craftsman who has no faith in education for the Negro, knows the evil of white tyranny. In order to live, he adapts and humbles himself before the whites. He forgets his own dissipation by working with his hands and by an occasional debauch with the town prostitutes, Stella and Cora, who reflect the exploitation of Negro women by both white and black men. Kabnis can not accept Halsey's advice for Negroes to stay in their "place"

⁵⁷Goede, p. 80.

and accept the old moral codes. Professor Layman, the self-appointed preacher who holds a conversation with Kabnis and Halsey one evening in Halsey's parlor, says, for instance, "Nigger's a nigger down this way, Professor. An only two dividins: good and bad. And even they aint permanent categories" (pp. 171-172).

Next Kabnis turns to Hanley, the school principal, for encouragement, but he has been driven to become an Uncle Tom, a hypocritical deferrer to the whites and a cruel oppressor of his fellow blacks.⁵⁸ While the city librarian and teacher often are culture heroes in writing by Negroes of the twenties, the principal is often the enemy of the people. Booker T. Washington, who symbolized everything repugnant in the life of modern Negro intellectuals, is symbolized by the principal. Therefore, Kabnis can not accept Hanley because his words are an echo of the Washington tradition. Kabnis rejects Lewis, who is "what a stronger Kabnis might have been, and in an odd faint way resembles him" (p. 189). Lewis, also, is an educated Negro from the North; but, unlike Kabnis, his life is ordered because his is rooted in the soil, and his vision is intact. Kabnis rejects Lewis: "There is a swift intuitive interchange of consciousness. Kabnis has a sudden need to rush into the arms of this man. His eyes call, Brother, and then

⁵⁸Durham, p. 20.

a savage, cynical twist-about within him to repulse Lewis. His lips curl cruelly. His eyes laugh" (pp. 191-192). Later on, Lewis acknowledges that he expects to get no help out of Kabnis in wanting to militantly oppose segregation. Because Kabnis is unable to deal with his own racial experience, Lewis feels that such an effort toward racial advancement curdles the kind of writer Kabnis is. The force which keeps Kabnis from accepting the salvation Lewis offers lies in Kabnis's expression:

The form thats burned into my soul is some twisted awful thing that crept in from a dream, a godam nightmare, an wont stay unless I feed it. An it lives on words. Not beautiful words. God almighty no. Misshapen, split-gut, tortured, twisted words. . . . White folks feed it cause their looks are words. Niggers, black niggers feed it cause theyre evil and their looks are words. Yallar niggerd feed it. The whole dream bloated purple country feeds it cause its goin down t hell in a hold avalanche of words. I want to feed th soul--I know what that is; the preachers dont--but I've got t feed it. I wish t God some lynching white man ud stick his knife through it an pin it to a tree (pp. 224-225).

The form burned into Kabnis's soul finds as its source a dream. It is the dream that led his "blue-blood" ancestors North; it is a dream of being white, which is a nightmare because it can never be. It is made clear that the Negro soul can never be white because its roots are in slavery.⁵⁹

Kabnis is surrounded by these Negroes who appear to be stereotypes, but are rather a representation of isolated

⁵⁹Ackley, p. 62.

traits of Negro life. Those characters discussed are unable to help Kabnis put form to his chaotic situation, but Carrie Kate, Halsey's sister, offers some hope to Kabnis. She lives by Sunday School virtues and represents the pure, untouched Negro soul, presenting a promise of life and love, a kind of fertility symbol. She brings food to the old man in the cellar, and, according to Rafael Cancel, helps Kabnis put away his robe, a symbol of sophistication and the negation of his blackness.⁶⁰ "Carrie notices his robe. She catches up to him, points to it, and helps him take it off. He hangs it, with an exaggerated ceremony, on its nail in the corner" (p. 239). There is one other character whom Kabnis rejects, and that is the old man whom Lewis calls Father John. Father John is a mute old man who represents exactly what Kabnis needs and fears. Father John is the incarnation of the silence of the universe that torments a man who can not depend on himself. Father John, more significantly, is a "symbol of the flesh and spirit of the past" (p. 127). A party is scheduled for the evening in "The Hole," where Father John is kept hidden and concealed. They all meet the old man who sits and broods over all the drinking and lovemaking. Lewis is drawn to the old man, a representation of the link with slavery and the African past. He does not concern Hanley as he remembers the

⁶⁰Cancel, p. 31.

oak-beam he has to put on a wagon. Kabnis wants only to forget Lewis's past and Halsey's future.⁶¹ All he wants is to get drunk and make love: "What in hell's wrong with you fellers? You with your wagon. Lewis with his Father John. This aint th time fer foolin with wagons. Daytime's bad enough f that. Ere, sit down. Ere, Lewis, you too sit down. Have a drink. Thats right. Drink corn licker, love th girls, an listen t th old man mumblin sin" (p. 214). Kabnis finds this symbol of the past irksome.

Kabnis can not enjoy the farewell party being given for Lewis, and his anxiety and guilt drive him to the old man. However, he rejects the old man and screams at him: "Whatsha lookin at me for? Y want to know who I am? Well, I's Ralph Kabnis--lot of good its goin to do y. Well? Whatsha keep looking for? I'm Ralph Kabnis. Aint that enough f y? Want the whole family history? Its none of your godam business, anyway" (pp. 216-217). In Kabnis's rejection of Father John, he rejects his own ancestral past. He refuses to accept Father John as a symbol of his link to slavery and the African past and angrily retorts: "Just like any done-up preacher is what he looks to me. Jam some false teeth in his mouth and crank him, and youd have God Almighty spit in torrents all around the floor. Oh, hell, and he reminds me of that black cockroach over

⁶¹Goede, p. 83.

yonder. An besides, he aint my past. My ancestors were Southern blue-bloods--" (p. 217).

The drama ends in a drunken debauch where Kabnis is left drunk and asleep near the old, mute slave. Kabnis becomes a man without dignity as he has progressively degraded himself throughout the drama. Now he is wallowing in his own self-hatred, but Carrie, who has been reluctant to submit to an intuitive union with Kabnis, offers him aid. A drunken wretch now, Kabnis is succored by Carrie as she draws the fever from his head and comforts him. Carrie, the fragile hope of the future race, has chosen communion with the old man, her ancestral past, and thereby draws strength and sustenance from him. This is evidence of the strength Kabnis could have found in his past which could give form to his chaotic life. This association with Carrie and Father John "would reinforce his sense of relatedness to his roots and save him from the isolation and impotency imposed upon him by life in a white dominated society and culture to which he had little fundamental connection."⁶²

Kabnis has represented in Part Three of Cane the contemporary northern born, educated Negro searching for his identity. Kabnis, in finally accepting the past as manifested in the words of Father John and Carrie, has accomplished a reconciliation of the black man with his

⁶²Lieber, p. 50.

ancestral heritage. Other characters in the novel have sought a communion with the heritage of the racial past, but only Kabnis accomplishes it. Carrie has helped him put away his robe, which symbolizes sophistication and the negation of his blackness; and his acceptance is finally achieved through the female, who symbolizes the Mother Earth. This section of Cane, Todd Lieber says, performs the same function as Toomer felt the trip in 1922 had served in his own life. Toomer, the northern born and educated mulatto, had returned to rural Georgia to reestablish contact and communion with his roots. What he has accomplished is a new sense of life and creativity, and a resurrection from the death that overwhelms the spirit in Part Two.⁶³ Kabnis may not have come to grips with his own identity, or may not have been able to overcome his experiences and give shape to his chaotic soul, but at least he is seeking some answers. He is trying to come to grips with the world by questioning it. Cane is, in this respect, an autobiographical prophecy of Toomer's own eventual assimilation, his failure to solidify himself in the collective identity of his people. William Fischer believes Cane does leave the reader with an incredible record of the pain Toomer must have experienced in struggling to express the spirit of the black man in the language of

⁶³Ibid

poetry. He probably saw himself in much the same predicament as Kabnis, the black poet seeking out words in literary form to fit the mold of his soul.⁶⁴ Toomer's hero-writer senses at least the first, tentative steps toward a commitment, through art, to the racial experience of Negroes. A rebirth and resurrection of the Negro spirit, the new life-giving force that Toomer attempted to create in Cane, is evident in the sun rising in the end: "Outside, the sun arises from its cradle in the tree-tops of the forest. Shadows of pines are dreams the sun shakes from its eyes. The sun arises. Gold-glowing child, it steps into the sky and sends a birth-song slanting down gray dust streets and sleepy windows of the southern town" (p. 239).

⁶⁴Fischer, pp. 211-212.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Jean Toomer's life, as well as Cane, was the story of modern man, the story of a search for identity. Toomer, the light-skinned racial hybrid who had lived in both white and black worlds without an integral sense of belonging to either, found that he needed to discover a fundamental relationship between art and experience. He thought he could make language a viable and powerful means of approaching reality. He wanted to create some work that would reestablish man's connection with his environment and his ancestral roots so that he could find a vital sense of his own identity and being. These concerns prompted the trip in 1922 through the South with Waldo Frank. On this trip he felt he had fulfilled his need for such a relatedness and identity through a communion with his Negro heritage. He wrote to the editor of the Liberator, Max Eastman, and his assistant Claude McKay:

Within the last two or three years, however, my growing need for artistic expression has pulled me deeper and deeper into the Negro group. And as my powers of receptivity increased, I found myself loving it in a way that I could never love the other. It has stimulated and fertilized whatever creative talent I may contain within me. A visit to Georgia last fall

was the starting point of almost everything of worth that I have done. I heard folk-songs come from the lips of Negro peasants. I saw the rich dusk beauty that I had heard many false ascents about, and of which till then, I was somewhat skeptical. And a deep part of my nature, a part that I had repressed, sprang suddenly to life and responded to them. Now, I cannot conceive of myself as aloof and separated. My point of view has not changed; it has deepened, it has widened.¹

In the lives of southern Negroes and their rural heritage, Toomer had found a reality to which he could respond and with which he could identify. It is this same reconciliation with his heritage, his communion with and relatedness to his southern roots that develops as the mood of Cane. It is a record of Toomer's own life search for black identity and the portrayal of the possibility of that communion and reconciliation with the racial heritage that Todd Lieber concluded exists for every "lost" black man in America.²

Throughout Toomer's life, he had sought his place in a world where he was held suspended between two cultures. He had desperately sought permanent interest early in his life and repeatedly excited himself with new careers, pursuing them with enthusiasm, then abruptly withdrawing from them. When Toomer accepted the job in southern rural Georgia, he had made an effort to break away from the engulfing white culture imposed on him in Washington, New

¹Arna Bontemps, "Introduction," Cane, Jean Toomer. Third ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), pp. viii-ix.

²Todd Lieber, "Design and Movement in Cane," CLA Journal, 12 (September, 1969), 35-50.

York, and Chicago. He had broken away from the coldness and passivity of the urban, mechanized North, the sexual sterility and perversion that resulted from northern restrictions, the lack of faith and endurance and the spiritual death of the North. He had discovered his roots in the warmth and fullness of the emotion of the southern Negro, the faith, endurance and sexual vitality; and he had discovered in the southern Negro, which he both subjectively and objectively portrayed in Cane, a wholeness and a richness of soul. What Toomer maintains in Cane is that the black man must know his earth-black roots, which the novel symbolically establishes in Georgia. The black man must never forget his black heritage though it is in contrast with the white world which is symbolized in the Washington and Chicago sections of the novel.

The novel is clearly autobiographical, based on Toomer's life in Washington and Chicago and the period he spent in the South as a school teacher. It might also be seen as the spiritual portrait or autobiography of Jean Toomer, the young black artist in search of a national and racial identity. Having carried his reader through the rural and passionate South of the primitive women and through the urban streets of the North where industrialism had perverted the Negro heritage, Toomer returns to the South as the artist, then in search of his selfhood.

Cane, as a novel of the black artist, embodies the alienation inherent in man and especially in the artist. The artist seeks a self that would be misunderstood by the rural southern town in "Kabnis," and, therefore, can stay only a month in a place, as Lewis does, because there is no place for the transcendent kind of man, this artist. Lewis is in exile, as Toomer was for the rest of his life; and certainly as a novel of the artist, Cane embodies the alienation inherent in the artist.³

The black artist is a spokesman seeking to define himself in both his real life and his literary expression. He defines himself in terms of his Negro cultural experience, but the values and styles of this experience have been consistently suppressed by the mores of the dominant white American culture. Cane is Toomer's attempt to define himself in the style of the particular culture of his people. He is one specific son, portrayed in "Song of the Son," who returned to the southern rural heritage. He has embraced his heritage, moreover, just before the memory of it has gone forever. The poet, by pouring his acceptance of his heritage into art, will make his work a new life-giving force in the form of an everlasting song. Such an acceptance, which Toomer and Kabnis had to make, must

³James Kraft, "Jean Toomer's 'Cane'," Markham Review, 2 (1970), 61-63.

include the pain and suffering of the past along with its beauty. The beauty of the song-lit race is being destroyed by the dominant white American culture with its materialism and industrialism. Therefore, the struggle for both Toomer and the characters of Cane is a conflict between the life styles and value systems of the black rural South, and the industrial, white culture of the North. As white American culture infringes upon the beauty of the Negro heritage, it develops a gap between the black man and his heritage. Thus, Toomer has presented Cane in thwarted fulfillment of the soul. The Negro soul is void of spontaneous emotion because of the inhibitions imposed by an industrial society. Constrained by white American mores, the black soul loses its ability to express its emotion. Yet, Toomer, through his search for identity in Cane, calls for black people to derive strength from their source, their Negro heritage, and to seek answers to the problems posed by a dehumanizing culture in which they live.

Finally, it is Toomer's acceptance and affirmation of the primitive vitality or rural, southern blacks which allow him to transcend both the sterility of the North and the suppressive mores of the South. Cane is more than an artistic celebration of Toomer's black heritage; it is ultimately an act of self-definition transformed into art.

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