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in Jean Toomer's *Cane***

## PROFESSIONAL PAPER

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# The Depiction of African-American Life during the Harlem Renaissance in Jean Toomer's *Cane*

This paper aims to discuss the problems that African Americans faced at the beginning of the twentieth century, notably discrimination and marginalization, and to explore the social movements which emerged at the time. The New Negro, a movement founded by Alain Locke, intended to achieve the inclusion of African Americans in U.S. society through art. In Harlem, New York, the Negro Renaissance began. The African-American modernist stream will be explored through the analysis of Jean Toomer's depiction of African-American life in the novel *Cane*. The novel is experimental, as Toomer combines poetry, prose, and drama, writes in a rural dialect, and incorporates poems and stream of consciousness into short stories. *Cane* has a tripartite structure – the first section is set in the American South, the second in the industrial North, and the final section again in the American South – in Georgia. The sections are tied together through folk motifs and the themes of oppression, alienation, and aimlessness. The novel is motivated by the author's racial ambiguity and his position as a mediator between "white" and "black" culture. In opposition to other modernist literature, Toomer focuses on the rural South in order to illustrate the folk culture still present there. Juxtaposing the North and the South, the author addresses the problems of African Americans while providing social critique.

### KEYWORDS

**the Harlem Renaissance, the New Negro movement, racial ambivalence, oppression, alienation**

The beginning of the twentieth century was a period of unprecedented technological advancement. Industrialization, modernization, urbanization, capitalism, and mass production had a profound effect on the economy, politics, and society of the United States and announced an era of progress. Nevertheless, progress did not permeate all spheres of society, as there was a stark contrast between promised democracy and equality for all, and the discrimination and marginalization that the minorities faced. Thus, "a new spirit" awoke among the masses as there was an increase in racial awareness among African Americans, the most numerous minority (Locke 46). This rise in racial consciousness resulted in the cultural movement known as the Harlem Renaissance. Houston Baker defines the Harlem Renaissance as "an outpouring of Afro-American writing, music, and social criticism that includes some of the earliest attempts by Afro-American artists and intellectuals to define themselves in 'modern' terms" (89). One of the novels of the Harlem Renaissance, which defies tradition with both its structure and its style, is Jean Toomer's *Cane*. Unlike most modernist literature, it is not concerned with urban centers, but rather illustrates the modern predicament and racial disenfranchisement and alienation through the portrayal of African Americans in the South.

The Harlem Renaissance commenced in Harlem, New York, during the 1920s, under the sway of cultural pluralism and diversity following a mass migration. In pursuit of better living standards, hundreds of thousands immigrated to the United States from all across the world. This created a culturally diverse society in the urban and industrial cities of the American North. However, foreigners were not the only migrants. As Walter Kalaidjian puts it, "adding to this ethnic mix, the urban centers of the Northern United States further received tens of thousands of transplanted working families during the so-called Great Migration of African Americans from the South" (2). Harlem provided the prospect of an imagined community, as the common experience of urban life not only called for new forms of group expression, but also greatly influenced the Afro-American collective identity. According to Charles Scruggs, this had previously been impossible, as those of African ancestry had more common complications and issues due to institutional, political, and social discrimination and overt racism that was present in American society (552).

Racial stereotypes distorted the image of the African American, whom various advertisements, films, and the minstrel stage illustrated as inferior, idle, and lacking intelligence and integrity (Sanders 137). Stephen Watt observes that in the minstrel show "music, lavish costuming and scenery, and conventional comic oratory entertained urban audiences at the same time as they advanced sharply delimited caricatures of blacks and blackness" (107). Victorian dichotomies between man and animal,

moral and immoral, savage and civilized further reinforced this view. Anthropologist Franz Boas conducted extensive research which proved that those of African origin were equally creative, compassionate, and competent as those of European origin: "If we were to select the most intelligent, imaginative, energetic and emotionally stable third of mankind, all races would be represented" (Boas 79). Boas published his findings in *The Mind of Primitive Man* and later in *Anthropology and Modern Life*, sparking controversy and debasing biological determinism, thus making a strong statement against racism and aiding the recent cultural and political pluralist movements.

One such movement was the New Negro, analogous to the Harlem Renaissance. Alain Locke, a professor of philosophy and the movement's main advocate, noted that the collective consciousness of African Americans was changing (46). He differentiates the New Negro from the "Old Negro," asserting that the Old Negro had in fact ceased to exist and was at the time a mere stereotype of a black man as docile, idle, and simple (Locke 47). According to Locke, the New Negro should shatter the stereotypes, avoid assimilation and the acceptance of middle-class values, and accept his cultural heritage instead (47). As Mark Sanders notes, the New Negro movement strived toward complete cultural, social, and political inclusion of African Americans, declaring that democracy was unsuccessful due to disregard for the African American, who was by all means a citizen of the United States and deserved equal rights and privileges (138). Thus, the New Negro founded institutions and organized demonstrations and marches in the streets.

The main means of claiming civil rights for the New Negro was art, notably literature. Baker suggests that art offered progress, since African Americans could succeed in it, as art was not reserved for white upper-middle-class Americans, unlike a multitude of professions at the time (90). Nonetheless, black authors were faced with a different problem – a divided audience. As Sanders observes, the American reading population had significantly increased, and a profusion of publishers and independent magazines encouraged the advancement of contemporary African-American writing (134). Nonetheless, Scruggs notes that the reception of black literature was less than favorable among African-American readers, considering the common notion that they were misrepresented, and preferred "nice literature," which would dispel the usual stereotypes and demonstrate "the bourgeois aspirations of the race" (544). On the other hand, the white reader wanted African-American characters in literature to comply with their own perception of the race – their nature comic and their cultures primitive and savage. Therefore, the author was compelled to cater to both and could appease neither. Furthermore, the assumed stance of other black authors remained ambiguous. The New Negro

movement demanded a radical change in representation, including the portrayal of the working classes in urban and industrial centers, while some considered such a depiction demeaning and shameful. Thus, due to the absence of consensus on the proper representation, the Negro Renaissance was not a homogeneous movement.

Racial ideology was affected by access to higher education and subsequent socio-economic upward mobility, and a new sense of alienation, acculturation, and assimilation in the industrial cities of the North contributed to the considerable change in Afro-American collective identity. The shift in sensibility was most evident in urban centers, such as Harlem, where jazz music, influenced by African folk songs and blues, flourished and impacted other arts, such as literature. Moreover, fascination with African culture and the primitive was felt beyond the boundaries of New York bars and nightclubs. Afro-Americans began to embrace their tradition in opposition to the prevailing pragmatism and Puritan values of American society. As Alain Locke declared, "the culture of the Negro is of a pattern integral with the times and with its cultural setting" (46). The Harlem Renaissance was in accord with the international modernist movement in arts, its main characteristics being the refusal of tradition, experimentation with literary forms, and the exploration and illustration of new experiences, such as urban life. The prominent authors of the Renaissance include Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Wallace Thurman, W.E.B. DuBois, Countee Cullen, and Jean Toomer.

In 1923, Jean Toomer wrote *Cane*, a composite novel consisting of poetry, short stories and a play, concerned with racial and regional ambivalence and identity, exploring the experience of African Americans in the United States at the start of the twentieth century. As Frederik Rusch remarks, Toomer utilized a plethora of modernist techniques (15). Its form is unusual, since Toomer combines poetry, prose, and drama into a single novel, incorporates poems into short stories, and writes in the present tense. As Rusch notes, Toomer uses staccato sentences in order to create tension (16). Stream of consciousness appears throughout the stories, and many characters speak in a rural vernacular dialect (Rusch 16). According to Rusch, there are fragmented and elliptical sentences, plenty of repetitions, various types of verse, and no sense of formal unity between each poem and narrative (15). Furthermore, the literary form is dependent upon the function (25).

The novel has a tripartite structure, the first section set in the American South, the second in the industrial and urban cities of the North, namely, Chicago and Washington D.C., and the third section is again set in the American South – in rural Georgia. As Rusch observes, the sections are tied together through common themes and motifs instead of shared

characters or narrative events (15). According to John Duvall, the author's inspiration for the novel stemmed from his own racial ambivalence (257). Toomer came from a privileged background, and the fact that he was light-skinned allowed him to circumvent the color line effortlessly (257). Kathleen Pfeiffer states that he preferred a "multiethnic identity" (3). Nonetheless, he was aware of the hardships of African Americans at the time. In order to explore his own racial identity, he traveled to Georgia to teach at a school, which motivated him to create *Cane* (Duvall 257). Thus, *Cane* is not concerned with industrial settings, but with the portrayal of Afro-Americans in small Southern towns.

The opening section of the novel captures Southern folk culture and illustrates the lives of lower-class African Americans in the South. It comprises narratives about the lives of five women and poems which serve as a transition between the narratives. The novel opens with "Karintha," a story about a beautiful black woman. The narrative explores relationships in the black community, as Karintha was a mischievous and violent child, yet no one reprimanded her as they deemed her lovely and desired her from an early age. She has little respect for other creatures, herself included. Karintha has been objectified since childhood, and her sexuality is exoticized. As a result of this, she becomes promiscuous. Sexuality and passion are the main motifs of the story. The topic is presented experimentally, portraying Karintha as a flash of color or a gust of wind. These comparisons, evocative of the modernist motifs of speed and dynamism, further show Toomer's dedication to the movement. Moreover, the Great Migration of Southern African Americans to the industrial North is referred to as "the smoke," which was "so heavy you tasted it in water" (Toomer 5). Karintha may be read as the embodiment of the Harlem Renaissance – beautiful and dynamic, yet objectified and underestimated. As Toomer writes, "the soul of her is a growing thing ripened too soon" (5). The males who wish to own it as a material thing and "ripen" it too soon may be interpreted as the divided audience with which Afro-American authors were faced – both white men and black men, unable to appreciate the beauty and liveliness of Afro-American art. Nonetheless, the narrator acknowledges Karintha's beauty and autonomy, reflecting Toomer's own attitude towards the Harlem Renaissance.

"Becky" tells the tale of a white woman excommunicated due to the fact that she gives birth to two black sons: "White or colored? No one knew, and least of all themselves" (Toomer 9). The story deals with segregation and ingrained racial prejudice in the South, since both whites and blacks condemn miscegenation and eschew the family. Moreover, it depicts alienation, as they live isolated from others and are unable to socialize properly. Furthermore, hypocrisy and conformity are condemned as the story illustrates how the community comes together only to cast

someone out, and they merely pray and preach, yet show no compassion or compulsion to aid the family. Becky is referred to among them as a "common, God-forsaken, insane white shameless wench" (8). She is a spectacle, a sensation. The author expresses his satire and disapproval of such an approach to miscegenation in the final paragraph, detailing how a man "threw his Bible on the pile" when he saw Becky's collapsed chimney, as if her mere existence was a curse on the community (10).

Another woman portrayed in the novel is Carma in the story of the same name. Toomer describes "Carma" as "the crudest melodrama" (15). After her husband finds out that she has had an affair, she stages her own death, causing him to join a gang. The narrator sympathizes with Carma and portrays the men who have gathered to hunt her down as brutes: "one would have thought they were cornering a rabbit or a skunk" (16). Thus, the narrator favors the outsider view of black culture, siding with Carma, portraying her as clever and independent and comparing her to a "sad strong song" (15). The story contains numerous "primitive" motifs, such as folk songs, witch-doctors, *juju* men, *greegree*, and flaring torches. Moreover, African culture is referred to in the following way: "The Dixie Pike has grown from a goat path in Africa" (15). The Southern landscape evocative of Africa is also mentioned in "Fern," a story about a woman into whose eyes "the whole countryside seemed to flow" (23). A Northern Negro becomes infatuated with her, but fails to entice her, which serves as an example of the juxtaposition of the North and the South. She has a spiritual experience, talking inarticulately while pounding her head and calling Christ. Superstition surrounds her, as was common in Georgia at the time.

The theme of race is further explored in "Esther," a story about a pale girl discriminated against because of her skin color. Racial ambivalence is depicted in this short story as Esther cannot come to terms with the color of her skin and dreams about King Barlo, a black preacher often in religious trance. Barlo is the epitome of a Southern black man – strong, astute, and spiritual. Nonetheless, her love remains unrequited, as she is left with "dead dreams and a forgotten resolution" (34). She is alienated because of the racial prejudices of the other African Americans in the town. The story ends on a pessimistic note, as the town disappears. Folk motifs, especially folk songs such as "Little Liza Jane" and "Deep River," are often referred to, and verses from these songs appear in the stories.

The narratives portray the oppression present in the South, notably lynching. According to Sanders, "between 1890 and 1917, some two to three black Southerners were hanged, burned at the stake, or quietly murdered every week" (137). The poem "Portrait in Georgia" illustrates the dead body of a woman using vocabulary reminiscent of the violent practice of lynching, such as a lyncher's rope, scars, blisters, and "black flesh after flame" (Toomer

38). In addition, lynching is described in "Blood-Burning Moon," in which a black man is burned at the stake in an old factory for courting a rich white man's black chef. The motif of a cane, after which the novel was named, appears throughout the story and the rest of the section, foreshadowing dreadful events. This poem describes the skeleton-like stone walls and rotting floors of the cotton factory. However, descriptions of the pastoral landscapes of the Southern countryside and agrarian culture are present as well. The language of the section is rather poetic and at times vernacular, characteristic of the South. Due to the use of black dialect, Toomer's novel may be considered regional. According to Duvall, regionalism is "a form of critique rather than a type of geographical determinism" (245). The social critique is rather evident, as the author explores differences in the perception of social roles, norms, culture, and identity in the South.

The second section of the novel offers a portrayal, as well as a critique, of urban black life. It starts with "Seventh Street," a fusion of poetry and prose. The initial verses, which are repeated after the section of prose, illustrate life in the city:

Money burns the pocket, pocket hurts,  
Bootleggers in silken shirts,  
Ballooned, zooming Cadillacs,  
Whizzing, whizzing down the street-car tracks (53).

City-dwellers are described as bootleggers and money-spenders, embracing modernization and new technologies. Prohibition and the Great War are addressed, and their influence is evident in the following sentences: "Black reddish blood. Pouring for crude-boned soft-skinned life, who set you flowing" (53). Furthermore, this is a reference to the violence on the city streets, and "Seventh Street" may be interpreted as a call for change.

The modernist motif of change, specifically the desire to escape the city, is the theme of "Beehive," a free-verse poem comparing the city to a black beehive: "Wish that I might fly out past the moon/ And curl forever in some far-off farmyard flower" (65). The speaker is depicted as a lone drone getting drunk with honey, contemplating an escape to the countryside. "Harvest Song," a poem about an overworked, fatigued farmer whose throat is dry, eyes blind and ears deaf from the dust of the oat fields, also illustrates alienation and disconnectedness in the following way: "It would be good to hear their songs [...] reapers of the sweet-stalk'd cane, cutters of the corn ... even though their throats cracked and the strangeness of their voices deafened me" (94). The speaker is aware that his fellow farmers are experiencing the same, unable to connect, unable to communicate with each other.

Another pessimistic narrative is "Box Seat." This is a story about Daniel Moore, a delusional dreamer who desires Muriel, yet cannot be with her, as the town would not approve of it because of his bad reputation. Daniel claims that "there is no such thing as happiness. Life bends joy and pain, beauty and ugliness, in such a way that no one may isolate them" (81). Unlike Muriel, he is not a conformist and maintains that one should not try to make people happy, but rather try to make them create instead. Creative tension in the context of the entire novel is achieved when the North and the South are juxtaposed. Attending a variety show at the Lincoln Theater, teeming with African Americans, Daniel perceives himself as an outcast, as he does not fit in with the formally-dressed crowd. Following a jazz overture, they watch a grotesque fight between two dwarfs. At the end of this act, the winner offers Muriel a bloodied rose. Although she is visibly appalled by it, Muriel reluctantly reaches for the rose. One may argue that the flower represents the heritage of the African American, beautiful and blooming, yet bloodied and shameful to some. Thus, Muriel has adopted the middle-class values and wishes to reject her heritage, attempting to assimilate and rise up the social ladder. In opposition to her, Daniel has no clear direction. Although he starts a fight at the theater, he forgets about it and simply walks away. This scene demonstrates that Daniel indeed does not care about the opinions of others. Through his prophetic words, it is apparent that his only aim is to "Ishtir the root-life of a withered people. Call them from their houses, and teach them to dream" (76). Dan's views are in accord with the New Negro movement.

The third and final section is dedicated to novelist and literary critic Waldo Frank. As Kathleen Pfeiffer notes, Toomer and Frank were close friends and often advised each other on their literary work (2). Moreover, Toomer "took an extraordinary journey south" with Frank, which greatly inspired him, and Frank continuously supported Toomer's career as a writer (2). Therefore, the dedication serves as an expression of gratitude, as well as a signal of Toomer's connection with experimental writers who influenced the form and style of his work. This section is set in the American South and consists solely of "Kabnis," the story of an African-American professor struggling with his own identity and racial conflicts. This section best reflects Toomer's own racial ambiguity and his inability, or rather his refusal, to come to terms with his racial identity, as he was light skinned and faced the same issues as Kabnis. Furthermore, in this section the author addresses segregation based on skin color and racial prejudice within African-American communities.

Ralph Kabnis is a Northerner who was originally from the South. His character is apprehensive and tense, unnerved by the folk songs he hears in the night winds of Georgia – "Dear Jesus, do not chain me to myself and set these hills and valleys, heaving with folk-songs, so close to me that I

cannot reach them" (Toomer 114). Being light skinned, Ralph is alienated and constantly struggles with racial ambiguity. Furthermore, he rejects his heritage, claiming his ancestors were orators, Southern blue-bloods, which is yet another proof of his rootlessness. He condemns the hypocrisy surrounding him, and is laid off due to his failure to comply with the rules of the school. Nonetheless, he is not suited for physical labor either, as he seems awkward and ludicrous compared to his coworkers. His opinions differ from those around him, as they maintain that oppression and racial conflicts are "things you neither does a thing or talks about if y want t stay around this away" (121). Kabnis believes the issues should be addressed, since "[t]his loneliness, dumbness, awful, intangible oppression is enough to drive a man insane" (114).

Superstition and paranoia are omnipresent in their society. This is especially evident in the mentions of ghosts and in Kabnis' hysterical and irrational behavior upon receiving a threat written on a rock thrown through his window. Nonetheless, conflicts do not occur only between those of different races, but within the same race as well, as the threat was written to an African American by other African Americans. Oppression is the underlying theme of the story and is referred to on many occasions. The most striking mention of oppression is the description of the lynching of Mame Lankins, a pregnant woman who was stabbed for hiding her husband from the lynchers, who also ripped her unborn baby from her womb and stuck it to a tree with a knife. In addition to the oppression they suffer, the characters are alienated, unable to communicate efficiently. The old mute man in the basement in which they gather represents this inability. Furthermore, he is the "[d]ead blind father of a muted folk who feel their way upward to a life that crushes or absorbs them" (Toomer 144). The father figure is prophetic, presenting to the reader a dreary vision of African Americans at the start of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, the short-story cycle ends on a positive note – "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" (Toomer 160). Thus, one may assert that Toomer's vision is ultimately optimistic, that he believes African Americans will awake, gain or claim their rights, and embrace their culture.

In conclusion, Jean Toomer's *Cane* depicts the beauty, dynamism, alienation, and violence in African-American communities at the start of the twentieth century. The novel demonstrates Toomer's involvement with the modernist movement in literature, as he experiments with literary form and style. Much like the Harlem Renaissance and the New Negro movement, *Cane* is not homogenous. In opposition to other modernist literature, Toomer focuses on the rural South in order to illustrate the folk culture still present there. He addresses the issues that African Americans faced, namely discrimination and a fragmented collective identity, and

the novel presents a call for change. The book speaks volumes about the author's racial ambivalence, as his liminal position as a mediator between the "whites" and "blacks" allows him to illustrate the life of African Americans from the perspective of both sides. Therefore, Toomer paints a colorful portrait of the life of African Americans during the Harlem Renaissance, juxtaposing the American North and South, and providing social critique.

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