

1971

# Jean Toomer's Cane: The Death of an Era

Christine Ann Lamberti

*Eastern Illinois University*

This research is a product of the graduate program in [English](#) at Eastern Illinois University. [Find out more](#) about the program.

---

## Recommended Citation

Lamberti, Christine Ann, "Jean Toomer's Cane: The Death of an Era" (1971). *Masters Theses*. 3966.  
<https://thekeep.eiu.edu/theses/3966>

This is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Theses & Publications at The Keep. It has been accepted for inclusion in Masters Theses by an authorized administrator of The Keep. For more information, please contact [tabruns@eiu.edu](mailto:tabruns@eiu.edu).

PAPER CERTIFICATE

TO: Graduate Degree Candidates who have written formal theses.

SUBJECT: Permission to reproduce theses.

The University Library is receiving a number of requests from other institutions asking permission to reproduce dissertations for inclusion in their library holdings. Although no copyright laws are involved, we feel that professional courtesy demands that permission be obtained from the author before we allow theses to be copied.

Please sign one of the following statements.

Booth Library of Eastern Illinois University has my permission to lend my thesis to a reputable college or university for the purpose of copying it for inclusion in that institution's library or research holdings.

May 17, 1971  
Date

Author

I respectfully request Booth Library of Eastern Illinois University not allow my thesis be reproduced because \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Author

BOOTH LIBRARY  
EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY  
CHARLESTON ILL 61922

---

**JEAN TOOMER'S CANE: THE DEATH OF AN ERA**

(TITLE)

BY

**Christine Ann Lamberti**

=

**THESIS**

**SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF**

**Master of Arts in English**

---

**IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY  
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS**

**1971**

---

YEAR

**I HEREBY RECOMMEND THIS THESIS BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING  
THIS PART OF THE GRADUATE DEGREE CITED ABOVE**

**May 17**

---

DATE

ADVISER

**May 17**

---

DATE

DEPARTMENT HEAD

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION . . . . .	1
------------------------	---

### PART I. THE PEACE OF SPIRITUAL ROOTS

"KARINTHA" . . . . .	5
"BECKY" . . . . .	7
"CARMA" . . . . .	9
"FERN" . . . . .	10
"ESTHER" . . . . .	13
LOUISA OF "BLOOD BURNING MOON" . . . . .	18

### PART II. THE DRIFTING LIFE

"SEVENTH STREET" . . . . .	25
"RHOBERT" . . . . .	27
"AVEY" . . . . .	28
"BOX SEAT" . . . . .	30
"BONA AND PAUL" . . . . .	34
"THEATER" . . . . .	38

### PART III. "KABNIS": RECOGNITION AND DESPAIR

"KABNIS" . . . . .	44
SOURCES CONSULTED . . . . .	52



## INTRODUCTION

In this thesis Jean Toomer's Cane will be discussed as a statement of man's need for spiritual roots. Spiritual roots, briefly defined, are those regional traditions which enable man to identify, often for generations, with a particular locale. Such roots indicate a harmonious blending into the course of the natural events of that locale. Such a blending produces a spirit of peace within those who experience it. In short, one possesses a "sense of roots" when it never occurs to him that he should be somewhere else, living some other type of existence.

In writing Cane Jean Toomer succeeds in portraying people with such roots, people such as the women of the first of the three-part book. Having established in Part I the existence that is possible when one possesses and maintains his roots, Toomer then illustrates the frustrations of people who have no roots. These people, the subjects of Part II of Cane, contrast greatly with those people of Part I. The contrast manifests itself in the manner in which the women of Part I, and all of the subjects of Part II, live within their respective environments. The rural Georgian women are unique in that they

transcend oppressive social and economic conditions. They are unaware of man-made codes of morality. They are therefore not to be judged as immoral; rather they must be viewed as individuals who do not live by codes contrived by other humans—they live lives of "naturalness." It is this very naturalness that causes their lives to blend peacefully and harmoniously with their locale.

In Part II of Cane Toomer presents people who have moved to large cities. They contrast greatly with the women of Part I because these people of the cities are without roots. Their lives have been influenced by codes of conduct which they find impossible to maintain. In the city foreign social and economic standards are imposed upon them. Theirs is not a peaceful existence, nor are they in harmony with their environment. Without such harmony these people must constantly dream to manufacture the kind of security that the women of Part I have naturally.

Part III of Cane, a dramatic work called "Kabnis," illustrates the despair one experiences when aware that he has no roots. "Kabnis" further suggests that the loss of one's roots has a finality about it. One cannot regain the naturalness by relocating geographically. Kabnis, the protagonist, can never expect to exist as harmoniously as the women of Part I. He is too far removed from the natural by his association with the social and economic in-

fluences of the city. In his quest for spiritual peace, Kabnis returns to rural Georgia only to find an alien and hostile culture. Instead of blending with the people whom he had anticipated longingly, Kabnis comes to reject, and to be rejected by, not only the people but the culture itself. The type of existence illustrated by the women of Part I of Cane, the blissful existence, is, for Kabnis, barely visible; instead Kabnis finds hate, greed and fear to be prime influences in the rural Georgians. Despairing indeed is this discovery to one who has desperately sought the ideal of peace. Only a hint of the natural life remains and the symbol of rooted life is portrayed by the few remaining Negroes who do exist peacefully. The certainty of the death facing such a peaceful existence is vividly portrayed in "Kabnis."

Perhaps in the eyes of the sociologist or historian, Toomer distorted the actual cultural conditions of rural Georgia in 1921; and critics like DuBois who claims, "Toomer does not impress me as one who knows his Georgia," have overlooked the obvious—that Cane presents an artist's view of the final stages of a dying era, an era in which human survival was based on a man's being wedded to the soil of his homeland.

Jean Toomer, reared in the urban culture of Washington, D. C., visited the rural Georgia that he depicts in Cane

when he was twenty-seven. His stay in Georgia seems to have aroused him personally and to have created a desire to capture in spirit the peaceful mood of the fading era—the only gift of permanency an author can offer. Says Toomer of his Georgia visit:

The setting was crude in a way, but strangely rich and beautiful. I began feeling its effect despite my state, or, perhaps, just because of it. There was a valley, the valley of "Cane," with smoke-wreaths during the day and mist at night. A family of back country Negroes had only recently moved into a shack not too far away. They sang. And this was the first time I'd ever heard the folk-songs and spirituals. They were very rich and sad and joyous and beautiful. But I learned that the Negroes of the town objected to them. They called them "shouting." They had victrolas and player-pianos. So, I realized with deep regret, that the spirituals, meeting ridicule, could be certain to die out. With Negroes also (p. 59) the trend was toward the small town and then toward 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. Just this seemed to sum life for me. And this was the feeling I put into "Cane." "Cane" was a swan-song. It was a song of an end. And why no one has seen and felt that, why people have expected me to write a second and a third and a fourth book like "Cane," is one of the queer misunderstandings of my life.

---

<sup>1</sup>Jean Toomer, Autobiography—Outline of the Story of the Autobiography. (Unpublished m.s., Fisk University, Nashville, Tennessee), Box 14#1. pp 58-59.



## PART I: THE PEACE OF SPIRITUAL ROOTS

### "KARINTHA"

Cane begins with a portrait, "Karintha," the sketch of a woman whose strong roots enable her to live a life of naturalness, a life of waking, working, playing, and loving. Because she possesses roots, one feels that she would never consider changing her life, a life which Toomer describes with intriguing charm:

Men had always wanted her, this Karintha, even as a child, Karintha carrying beauty, perfect as dusk when the sun goes down. Old men rode her hobby-horse upon their knees. Young men danced with her at frolics when they should have been dancing with grown up girls. God grant us youth, secretly prayed the old men. The young fellows counted the time to pass before she would be old enough to mate with them. This interest of the male, who wishes to ripen a growing thing too soon, could mean no good to her. (p. 1)

There is something about Karintha that Toomer is unable or unwilling to identify completely. Rather he has to point out her beauty and mysterious charm by indirectly contrasting her with others. This mysterious quality that "tells others just what it was to live" appears, to this writer, to be firm spiritual roots. Karintha, while not understood, is envied; she is a "wild flash"; she is captivating:

With the other children one could hear, some distance off, their feet flopping in the two-inch dust. Karintha's running was a whirl. It had the sound of the red dust that sometimes makes a spiral in the road . . . her voice, high pitched, shrill, would put one's ear to itching. But no one ever thought to make her stop because of it. She stoned the cows, and beat her dog, and fought the other children . . . Even the preacher, who caught her at mischief, told himself that she was as innocently lovely as a November cotton flower. (p. 2)

The image of a native plant, the November cotton flower, when used to describe Karintha, further suggests that hers is a life, which, like that of the flower itself, grows from the soil. Karintha's relationships with others, particularly men, confirms this sense of naturalness:

Homes in Georgia are most often built on the two-room plan. In one, you cook and eat, in the other you sleep, and there loves goes on. Karintha had seen or heard, perhaps she had felt her parents loving. One could but imitate one's parents, for to follow them was the way of God. She played "home" with a small boy who was not afraid to do her bidding. That started the whole thing. (pp. 2-3)

In spite of the many sexual relationships which follow, one cannot judge her conduct as promiscuous. To do this would be to judge her with the social mores of a foreign culture. For Karintha, to love is natural; for her to feel shame for loving is not natural. So natural are her impulses that, even when she destroys the infant, the product of this loving, she reveals no regret. Robert

Bone in his critical study, The Negro Novel in America, seems to miss Toomer's point when he calls this act murder, and he seems to judge Karintha according to moral standards completely foreign to her.

Regardless of her actions, Karintha remains an image of Georgian loveliness. This woman illustrates Toomer's admiration for those possessing the spiritual peace growing out of a strong sense of cultural roots.

### "BECKY"

"Becky," the second sketch of Part I, further illustrates Toomer's admiration for those who possess roots. Becky's roots are solidly planted, and despite continual hardships she maintains her existence. Like Karintha, Becky remains in harmony with her homeland, even though by introducing interracial sexual relationships, Toomer intensifies the potentially sinister drama of Becky's life:

Becky was the white woman who had two Negro 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. 8)

Becky's having loved, in what seemed to her a natural way, at least one black man and having created two black children creates havoc with the people of the nearby town, even though such interracial relationships, while not openly acknowledged as such, have always been a natural

part of southern culture:

Becky had one Negro son. Who gave it to her? Damn buck nigger, said the white folks mouths. She wouldn't tell. Common, God-forsaken, insane white shameless wench said the white folk's mouths . . . Who gave it to her? Low-down nigger with no self-respect, said the black folks' mouth. She wouldn't tell. Poor Catholic poor-white crazy woman, said the black folks' mouth. (p. 8)

Becky, however, is unaffected by social ostracism. As in the case of Karantha, one never feels that this woman grieves about her existence or that she ever dreams of living another kind of life.

Becky's story comments both upon her solid roots and upon the anxieties and unnaturalness of the people who condemn her, both blacks and whites. Becky's harmonious life, even in the face of hardships, somehow overwhelms her judges and they are moved to gestures of concern:

White folks and black folks built her cabin, fed her and her growing baby; prayed secretly to God who'd put his cross upon her and cast her out. (p. 8)

Even though Toomer reveals their lives only as young men, the ominous suggestion is clear that the sons will never know peace, that they will remain "sullen and cunning" as when they "beat and cut a man." Lacking any sense of peace "they drifted from job to job." Both blacks and whites think of taking in the boys, but they are too bitter ever to accept such hypocritical offers,



and the rootless pair leave town, leaving only Becky, the white woman whose roots never escape her and whose roots afford her peace.

### "CARMA"

In the third sketch, "Carma," one again finds a spiritual strength which allows the protagonist to exist peacefully against a background of violence. Dressed in overalls she plows fields and drives her mules down the rows, "strong as any man." Carma works the hard farm life and yet her womanliness, which attracts other men, causes her husband to kill. Toomer explains:

Carma's tale is the crudest melodrama.  
Her husband's in the gang. And its her  
fault he got there. Working with a con-  
tractor, he was away most of the time.  
She had others. No one blames her for  
that. (p. 18)

Yet, despite the seeming indiscretion, Carma's story gives no suggestion that she would desire another life or that she would do anything to change her present situation. As in the case of Karintha's dead child and her many lovers, and Becky's black lover or lovers, Carma's having "others" is as natural a part of her way of life as is her "driving a Georgia chariot down an old dust road." The simplicity of this naturalness illustrates the powerful solace one attains by possessing roots. Carma does not need to look to far off Africa for peace. She has her peace and her

place within the canefields of Georgia:

Puagant and composite, the smell of  
farmyards is the fragrance of the woman.  
She does not sing; her body is a song.  
She is in the forest, dancing. Torches  
flare . . . juju men, grugree, witch doc-  
tors . . . torches. The Dixie Pike has  
grown from a goat path in Africa. (pp. 17-18)

Other images also suggest that the marriage that is  
most important to Carma is her marriage to the soil, a  
union consummated by the sun itself:

The sun, which has been slanting over  
her shoulder, shoots primitive rockets  
into her mangrove-gloomed, yellow flower  
face . . . The sun is hammered to a band  
of gold . . . (pp. 16-17)

This union can not be disturbed by outside influences,  
either those as traditionally binding as the marriage  
of a man to a woman, or those as volatile as the revenge  
of a wronged husband.

### "FERN"

In what is perhaps the closest commingling of soul  
and soil in Cane, Toomer tells the story of Fern, a story  
which, in the words of Montgomery Gregory, conveys "ex-  
quisite physical charm coupled with an almost divine qual-  
ity of inarticulate spirituality."<sup>2</sup>

One can not read of Fern without reading of her eyes.

---

<sup>2</sup>Montgomery Gregory, "Cane," Opportunity. I (Decem-  
ber, 1923), 375.

Fern's eyes seem to hold all that Toomer has been describing thus far in Cane. Fern's eyes reveal the communion of a people with their soil. Fern's eyes "held God"; through her eyes, or possibly through this communion that has taken place and has been reflected in her eyes, a race of rural black peasants of Georgia are able to live in peace:

If you have heard a Jewish cantor; 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 mobile rivers to their common delta. (p. 24)

Indeed, "they were strange eyes," strange because, while they reflected sorrow, they gave no indication that Fern was, in fact, affected by sorrow—or, for that matter, by anything else. In particular, Fern seemed not to be affected even by her most common experience, men "everlastingly bringing her their bodies." Even though "Fern's eyes said to them that she was easy," Fern is not characterized as a woman happy with sexual love. Her reaction to men is one of blandness, but the reaction of men to Fern is a reaction worth noting. For some inexplicable reason, after men had taken her, they felt "bound to her. They became attached to her, and hungered after finding the barest trace of what she might desire." Perhaps the mystery of her eyes bound them to her and, as Toomer points out;

men are apt to idolize or fear that which they cannot understand, especially if it be a woman . . . A sort of superstition crept into their consciousness of her being somehow above them. Being above them meant that she was not to be approached by anyone. She became a virgin. (p. 26)

Logically this is impossible, but Toomer convincingly makes her new position plausible, even acceptable:

She did not deny them, yet the fact was that they were denied . . . She became a virgin. Now a virgin in a small southern town is by no means the usual thing, if you will believe me. (p. 26)

Fern does become "special," and out of reach of all pursuers.

The mystery surrounding Fern increases with further study of her life. Toomer tries unsuccessfully to picture Fern living a different life, in another locale. First he places her in a tenement amid the "indifferent throngs of Harlem"; then he tries to visualize her moving North, marrying even a doctor or lawyer or anyone who would make money. Next, he pictures her as a prostitute along Chicago's State Street, or as a black woman living in a larger Southern town "where white men are more aggressive," or even as a "white man's concubine."

Always her men feel that they should do something for her; even the narrator says that there is "something I must do for her." Yet with all of their offerings, whether they only dream of them, or whether they actually give her gifts, the men feel their efforts to be useless. Could



they perceive the meaning of Fern's eyes, they would understand why she does not respond to them. To understand Fern's eyes is to understand the soul and soil of this woman and people like her--simple, inexhaustible spirits, whose lives depend upon the soil and the crops derived from the earth. Such a marriage of woman and soil is not to be ignored. Fern is indeed mysterious to these men, whose lives had been fashioned by materialistic social traditions, which equate human satisfaction with worldly wealth. Fern is satisfied not because she lives luxuriously, but because she possesses roots. Unlike the frustrated pursuers, Fern does not experience anxieties; she, like the other women of Part I, exists harmoniously in and with the canefields of the Dixie Pike.

### "ESTHER"

The story of "Esther" appears to be Toomer's attempt to disclose some of the hitherto undefined mystery that surrounds the rooted women of Part I. Through Esther, Toomer explains the actual thoughts of a rooted person; these thoughts, taking the form of fantasy, partially reveal the intense spiritual involvement that Esther can experience in spite of her living in an environment composed entirely of rootless people.

Esther's environment differs from those of Karintha, Becky, Carma, Fern, and Louisa, for, unlike the others,

who live in rural areas, Esther lives in a small Southern town and works in her father's store. In Esther's case Toomer reveals that spiritual roots can penetrate, not only the canefields of the countryside, but also the dirt roads of a small town.

Esther holds the same mystery that the others hold, and like them, she maintains a spiritual peace, but, unlike them, she is allowed to reveal the detailed content of her reveries. Her first dreams seem like simple childish fantasies:

Esther begins to dream. The low evening sun sets the windows of McGregor's notion shop aflame. Esther makes believe that they really are aflame. The town fire department rushes madly down the road. (p. 40)

Esther's dream continues and becomes more complex as she imagines that she has rescued a tiny infant from the blazing building, and she envisions the child as her own. Soon she dreams again. This dream, however, is not as childish and innocent; it contains elements of realism that upset Esther:

Another dream comes. There is no fire department. There are no heroic men. The fire starts. The loafers on the corner form a circle, chew their tobacco faster, and squirt juice just as fast as they can chew. Gallons on top of gallons they squirt upon the flames. The air reeks with the stench of scorched tobacco juice. Women, fat chunky Negro women, lean scrawny white women, pull their skirts up above their heads and display the most ludicrous

underclothes. The women scoot in all directions from the danger zone. 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, miraculous thing: its breath is sweet and its lips can nibble. She loves it frantically. Her joy in it changes the town folks' jeers to harmless jealousy, and she is left alone. (p. 41)

Esther holds the juice-covered child, and the joy that she feels, when, through her touch she cleanses the child, illustrates the peace of shared spiritual innocence.

Esther's next fantasy, and most obvious test of the strength of her spiritual peace, concerns King Barlo. At twenty-two, "with a vague sense of life slipping by," Esther convinces herself that she is in love with Barlo:

Barlo's image gives her a slightly stale thrill. She spices it by telling herself his glories. Black. Magnetically so. Best cotton picker in the county, 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. Va-grant preacher. Lover of all the women for miles and miles around. (p. 43)

Viewing Barlo as the spiritual father of the juice-covered child, and thinking that the same kind of peaceful relationship could be established between herself and Barlo, Esther plans to tell Barlo of her love for him. The nomadic Barlo has not appeared in town for

five years, but Esther manages to use his absence for further dreaming and for planning their confrontation. She uses her resolution to love him as a "sort of wedding cake for her to tuck beneath her pillow and go to sleep upon."

In Barlo's absence Esther ages, "her hair thins. It looks like the dull silk on puny corn ears. Her face pales until it is the color of the gray dust that dances with dead cotton leaves." (p. 43) It is significant to note that Toomer chooses not to use flattering imagery in describing Esther. In fact, her appearance seems to worsen as the story progresses. The contrast between the spiritual makeup of Esther and that of Barlo is so great that even their physical appearances are strikingly different.

Finally, when Esther is twenty-seven, King Barlo returns to town. More attractive than before, and wealthier, Barlo and a young white girl pass Esther's father's store:

He passes her window, driving a large new car. Cut out open. He veers to the curb, and steps out. Barlo has made money on cotton during the war. He is as rich as anyone. Esther is suddenly animate. She goes to her door. She sees him at a distance, the center of a group of credulous men. She hears the deep-bass rumble of his talk. The sun swings low. McGregor's windows are aflame again.

Esther is an intense woman about to attempt an intense



statement of love. Such a statement would, thinks Esther, provide her with an entirely different life style—a life style which would, in fact, because it would cast her with the drifting rootless people like Barlo, bring about her destruction. As she approaches Barlo's tobacco-reeking room, Esther, approaching the unknown harshness of reality, becomes violently dizzy, but she confronts Barlo nevertheless. Upon hearing the purpose of her visit, Barlo answers, "This ain't the place for y. This ain't the place for y." The thick ugly smile on Barlo's face awakens Esther. Barlo's face appears "hideous"; and Esther suddenly realizes that she could never really want him. Barlo is not the man she has created these five years. Barlo is not a man who communicates with God. Barlo is a shiftless drunk who could never know or share peace:

. . . Like a somnambulist she wheels  
around and walks stiffly to the stairs  
. . . She steps out. There is no air,  
no street, and the town has completely  
disappeared. (p. 48)

In blotting out reality, Esther returns to the peace of herself, the solace of her reveries.

The love that might have existed in "Karintha," the shame in "Becky," the grief in "Carma," and the loneliness in "Esther," could have figured greatly in the lives of the women of the Part I. Yet, none of those

forces changes the lives of any of these women. None of them runs away to find a better life. Each of them remains in her environment, and each of them survives because she does remain.

#### LOUISA OF "BLOOD BURNING MOON"

The final example of the peace that comes from having spiritual roots is in the character Louisa of the story "Blood Burning Moon." Desired by two men, one white and one black, Louisa remains detached and never wholly gives herself to either.

Bob Stone, a white man, loves her and "By the way the world reckons, he had won her." (p. 51) If he had won her as he believes, however, Louisa would not have another lover. Bob does not really have her, because he has not won her by the way her world reckons, and their worlds are not the same. Bob is the younger son of Louisa's employer, a man of fading wealth, yet he is still a man of undeniable influence in the small factory town. Because of this influence Bob feels he offers more attraction to Louisa than Tom Burwell, her black lover. And to Bob, openly loving Louisa is a mark of his family's influence. Even though his family no longer owns slaves, his association with a black woman seems to satisfy his urge to defy social convention. To Bob, Louisa is not a woman to love and respect:

She was lovely in her way. Nigger way. What 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? Listening to them at church didn't tell you anything—unless it was gossip, unless they wanted to talk of course, about farming and licker, and crops—but those weren't nigger. Nigger was something more. (p. 60)

To Bob, Louisa is somehow something more, and perhaps it is this undefined quality that attracts him to her.

Louisa's mysterious way, nigger way, intrigues Bob, yet in spite of the intrigue, Bob always remembers that his place in the social system is well above Louisa's; it is, in fact, a place so much higher that it even makes the possibility of a fight with Tom Durwell, Louisa's black lover, an absurdity. "Some position for him to be in, him, Bob Stone, of the old Stone family, in a scrap with a nigger over a nigger gal . . ." (p. 60)

As a product of Southern society, Bob is never really able to understand Louisa's way. The peacefulness of roots is a luxury not available to his fading family:

His family had lost ground. Hell no, his family still owned the niggers, practically. Damned if they did, or he wouldn't have to duck around so . . . In the good old days . . . Ha! Those were the days. His family had lost ground. Not so much though. Enough for him to have to cut through old Lemon's canefield by way of the woods, that he might meet her. She was worth it. Beautiful nigger gal. Why nigger? Why

not, just gal? No, it was because she was a nigger that he went to her. Sweet . . . the scent of boiling cane came to him. (pp. 60-61)

Bob's desire for Louisa is based not upon envy of her color, but upon envy of what her blackness represents. To Bob, being black means having roots, belonging to the soil, not to the money or prestige that results from the cultivation of the soil. Bob drifts, looking for security, and recognizing Louisa's spiritual peace, desires it for himself.

Louisa's other lover, Tom Burwell, does not, like Louisa, claim kinship with his soil; he does not have a soul rooted in his soil. Too often Tom has witnessed racial inequities in the factory where he is employed. Often Tom has desired another life, wishing to be in another place, working at another job. With these feelings Tom does not live as a person who has roots. He is not at peace, nor does he seem to blend harmoniously with his environment. Obvious examples of Tom's nature involve his dreams and fantasies, devices, as shown by Toomer, not common—except in the case of Esther—to people with roots:

Ise carried y with me into the fields, day, after day, an after that, an I sho can plow when yo is there, an I can pick cotton. Yassur! Come near beatin Barlo yesterday. I sho did Yassur! An next year if ole Stone'll trust me, I'll have a farm. My own. My bales will buy y



what y gets from white folks now. Silk stockings an purple dresses— . . .  
(pp. 56-57)

In his dreaming, Tom has even fancied himself as the rival of Barlo, "Best cotton picker in the county, in the state, in the world," as well as a financial success, with his own farm next year. Tom's dreams point out his dissatisfaction with his present position, and, further, they illustrate a contrast between him and Louisa. By dreaming of taking Louisa away to their own farm, Tom seems to be making Louisa's tie to the little town grow even stronger. She remains in the town without committing herself to Tom, because her life must be shared with someone who already has roots, not someone who believes that through success he will someday gain them. Tom's offer does not tempt Louisa.

The inevitable confrontation between the rivals, Stone and Burwell, symbolizes the disharmony that exists among uprooted people. Not only are they not at peace with themselves but they are unable to exist side by side with others who are equally discontent. More violent than the other stories and sketches in Cane, Louisa's tale presents the added issue of the sharply defined social schism between the black and white races. Louisa reacts to Bob's death not as a woman who loves him, nor even as a woman with whom he has been emotionally in-

volved. Her indifference to Bob's death, as well as to the ominous fate awaiting Tom, illustrates that she is completely separated from these men. Her separation causes her to be indifferent. Living in a world differing greatly from the worlds of Bob and Tom, Louisa is unaffected by the loss of the men. She can continue living harmoniously because her roots have united her soul with the soil, not with the souls of these drifting men.

When the fight between Tom and Bob occurs, Louisa remains at her home and does not seem aware of, nor follow the sheep-like behavior of, the screaming mob. Her serenity contrasts greatly with the frenzy of the mob:

The mob yelled. Its yell echoed against the skeleton stone walls and sounded like a hundred yells. Like a hundred mobs yelling. Its yell thudded against the thick front wall and fell back. Ghost of a yell slipped through the flames and out the great door of the factory. It fluttered like a dying thing down the single street of factory town. Louisa, upon the steps 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 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:

Red nigger moon, Sinner!  
Blood-burning moon. Sinner!  
Come out that factory door. (p. 67)

Instead of grieving, Louisa begins to sing. Uncon-

scious of any evil in the moon, Louisa sings to the red plate glowing richly in the sky. Unaware of tragedy, Louisa begins to repeat the events of her evenings. She wonders why the people whom she knows are not joining her in the singing, and she entertains the possibility of a visit from Tom Burwell. Such musings illustrate clearly that Louisa's life transcends the events of the recent tragedy. She is different. Her world remains peaceful with only a hint of the forboding danger awaiting the rooted people. Like all of the women in Part I, who have illustrated that the peaceful life is the rooted life, Louisa hints that their existence is in danger. The "blood-burning moon" foretells this danger.

Tom and Bob are unable to win Louisa because they are unable to uproot her. For Louisa to live harmoniously she can not live with either man. Likewise, because of their rivalry, neither of these men can allow the other to live. Their destruction is caused by their dissatisfaction. Neither of them is to look upon each other under a full moon, peacefully. Instead, the moon that illuminates their land, and the land of the people in the coming section of Cane, is a reflection of blood, and a moon which glows like blood offers a violent light.

## PART II: THE DRIFTING LIFE

The entire collection of sketches contained in Part II of Cane aids in illustrating the result of the "end of an Era." Part II illustrates the lives of people who are removed from their homeland and have no roots. Since Part II takes place in the cities of Washington and Chicago, the possibility of the old Southern roots penetrating the new concrete environment is nonexistent. Toomer has stopped writing of the harmony and peacefulness of being united to one's soil, and by doing so has pointed out the inevitable death of such an era. With the industrial growth in the North in the 1920's, many blacks from the South tried to improve their social and economic conditions and went North to the big cities of New York, Chicago, Detroit, and Washington to work in the factories.

Living in the cities provided new experiences. No longer could the people sit on their porches and harmonize with the natural beauty of the earth as they had done in "Fern," or in some of the poetry in Part I. Such calm observation can be seen in poems such as "Georgia Dusk."

The sky, lazily disdaining to pursue  
The setting sun, too indolent to hold  
a lengthened tournament for flashing gold  
Passively darkens for night's barbecue,



A feast of moon and men and barking hounds,  
an orgy for some genius of the South  
With blood-hot eyes and cane lipped scented  
mouth,  
Surprised in making folk-song from soul sounds.  
(p. 22)

The people who came North could not afford homes; most were forced into small apartments; and the only escape from these tenements was the streets and their nightlife.

For a time, as a young man, Toomer worked as an usher in a theater in downtown Washington; consequently, the sketch "Box Seat" has a quality of realism which indicates that the author is quite familiar with his subject. After only four months at this job, Toomer began to realize that he could not function wholly in this environment; nor could he ever hope to find fulfillment if he were to remain: "I have ambitions, dreams, visions of achievement. I decided that Washington was no place for me."<sup>3</sup> Thus, the characters of Part II, in particular Dan Moore and the narrator of "Avey," function as voices for the author attempting to point out the inevitable destruction of the drifting, rootless people.

"SEVENTH STREET"

The change in tone from the rural serenity of

<sup>3</sup>Jean Toomer, "Outline of Autobiography in Eight Books," (unpublished m.s., n. d.) Fisk University, Box 14, 41, p. 15.

Georgia to the lively streets of Washington is obvious in the imagery of the entire second section, and in particular the imagery of "Seventh Street," the first sketch of Washington.

Money burns the pocket, pocket hurts,  
 Bootleggers in silken shirts,  
 Ballooned, zooming Cadillacs,  
 Whizzing, whizzing down the street-car tracks.  
 (p. 71)

The apparent dislike for Seventh Street, the "bastard of Prohibition," is echoed in the lines containing the recurring question asked of the bastard, "Who set you flowing?" (p. 71) The voice repeatedly asks those people of the street who made them come here. The voice explains that God would not do such a thing, and that the force flowing through these people is money. The dominant mood of "Seventh Street" is one of gloom, a gloom that comes only when a man has lost his security, his roots. "Seventh Street" with its mood of gloom serves as a harbinger of the devastation awaiting the black man who moves North. Such a move can only result in a frustrating relationship with the foreign environment—one that, in Part II, leads to destructive outlets such as alcohol, sex, and gambling. These people cannot find a peaceful existence with any of these outlets, and one can only anticipate and observe their downfall.

## "RHOBERT"

The frustrations found in "Seventh Street" are heightened if one is unable to obtain a job because he lacks intelligence or skill. The subject of the second sketch, "Rhobert," is such a man. Rhobert's problems are metaphorically compared to those of a deep sea diver whose helmet is so heavy that it forces him down to the bottom of the sea. Rhobert's problems have become that monumental to him. Rhobert's God is a "Red Cross man with a dredge and a respiration pump." (p. 74) Unfortunately this God is not near Rhobert and does not give solace to his life; this God is "waiting for you at the opposite periphery." (p. 74) Rhobert's total disregard for his wife and children indicates the depth of depression contained in his dreams:

Rhobert does not care. Like most men who wear monstrous helmets, the pressure it exerts is enough to convince him of its practical infinity. And he cares not two straws as to whether or not he will ever see his wife and children again. Many a time he's seen them drown in his dreams and has kicked about joyously in the mud for days after. (p. 74)

The realistic idea of having to support a family causes the penniless man to escape his situation. Rhobert's escape, like the escape taken by many other rootless people, comes in the form of dreaming. However, Rhobert's situation is so bleak that he is unable to create any

dreams that are pleasant. The only relief given Rhobert by dreaming comes when he dreams of the death of his family, and thus the elimination of the worry of supporting them.

It is a sad thing to see a banty-bowed, shaky, ricket-legged man straining the raw insides of his throat against smooth air. Holding furtive thoughts about the glory of pulp-heads strewn in water.  
(pp. 74-75)

Rhobert's only hope for peace comes with death or "when the water is drawn off." But "how long before the water will be drawn off? Rhobert does not care." (p. 74) Rhobert's despair is so great that he is even unable to generate the interest needed to anticipate death, a state that would eliminate all his problems. Truly he does not care; he is a man drifting aimlessly, without passion for either life or death.

### "AVEY"

Inevitable destruction also faces the woman of the next sketch, "Avey." Avey's destruction is not due to financial frustrations as was Rhobert's. Her drifting is the ultimate destiny of the rootless person. Even though she is befriended and offered help, Avey is too far removed from any roots for anyone or anything to significantly influence her life.

Avey, a prostitute, seems to be highly regarded by



the young men of the neighborhood. The narrator, in particular, can remember longing for Avey even before he became acquainted with her. When he does become acquainted with her, he feels that he loves her immediately. Then, after learning about Avey, and her aimless character, he comes to loathe her. Avey, he explains, is without ambition; she has no drive within her to strengthen her life, either spiritually or materially. She does not fear her instability, and if she does, she is too lazy to let such anxieties frustrate her or complicate her life. After a time the narrator wants nothing more to do with her. He explains that in his own lifetime he will overcome his environment and make something of himself. Avey, however, like Rhobert, shows no signs of the desire to change, and the rut she has dug for herself disgusts the ambitious narrator: "There was no excuse for a girl taking life so easy. Hell! she was no better than a cow." (p. 83)

Perhaps the narrator is naive in condemning Avey and desiring more in his own life. Still the fact is that Avey's life offers the most expedient method of survival in the chaos of the streets. At one point, however, the narrator's opinion of Avey, and Toomer's imagery, seem to soften:

Robins spring about the lawn all day.  
 They leave their footprints in the grass.  
 ...And when the wind is from the South,  
 soil of my homeland falls like a fertile  
 shower upon the lean street of the city.  
 (p. 85)

Perhaps the wind was coming from the South on this particular afternoon, because this day the narrator begins to prophesy to Avey, telling her once again of what she could do with her life if she would only try:

I started to hum a folk-tune. She slipped her hand in mine . . . I traced my development from the early days to the present time, the phase in which I could understand her. I described her own nature and temperament. Told how they needed a larger life for their expression . . . I asked her to hope, and build up an inner life against the coming of that day. (p. 86)

The young man's lecture is as sincere as it is unrealistic. In her lifetime Avey will only experience drifting. Never will she be able to understand even the meaning of roots. Without intentional disrespect, Avey sleeps during the lecture, only further illustrating how foreign such ideas are to her. Even though the sketch ends without hope for the drifter, the character Avey seems to be treated without harshness, and somehow, lying on the grass, she seems as temporarily peaceful as any other "orphan woman."

### "BOX SEAT"

The prophecy that begins with the narrator in "Avey" is further developed in "Box Seat" with the main character of the sketch, Dan Moore. Dan, a young black, lives a life of frustration as he tries to exist within the city. His anxieties are heightened as he tries to "save"

a lost generation. Dan's missionary zeal is basic to his nature. He believes it is his duty to awaken the sinners of the streets and lead them to salvation. Dan's downfall comes when he tries to substitute the satisfaction of religious crusading for the void created by the loss of his roots, not recognizing the supremacy of the latter. Because of this he will never exist peacefully:

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. Only the other  
day, a dope fiend brushed against me—  
Don't laugh, you mighty, juicy, meat-hook  
men. Give me your fingers and I will  
peel them as if they were ripe bananas.  
(pp. 105-6)

Dan's attempt to arouse the sinners is symbolized in his knocking on Muriel's door. In this passage the door represents the barrier between Dan and those whom he desperately wishes to save.

His knuckles are raw bone against the  
thick glass door. He waits. No one comes.  
Perhaps they haven't heard him. He raps  
again. This time, harder. He waits. No  
one comes. Some one is surely in. He  
fancies that he sees their shadows on the  
glass. Shadows of gorillas. Perhaps they  
saw him coming and don't want to let him  
in . . . . (p. 106)

Dan dreams that he will save the drifting people and bring the "good news" to them:

Dan goes to the wall and places his ear  
against it. A passing street car and  
something vibrant from the earth sends



a rumble to him. That rumble comes from the earth's deep core. It is the mutter of powerful underground races. Dan has a picture of all the people rushing to put their ears against walls, to listen to it. The next world-savior is coming up that way. Coming up. A continent sinks down. The new-world Christ will need consummate skill to walk upon the water where huge bubbles burst . . . . (p. 108)

As the scene shifts to the theater, Dan demonstrates that his desire to save is greater than his desire for roots. So great is the desire to save that Dan feels obligated to fight to defend it from the threatening stares of the people in the theater. If these people were rooted, they would possess their beliefs without having them forced upon them. Under these conditions Dan's job would be unnecessary, for he would not have to conduct his missionary work if he were a peacefully rooted man. Such self harmony would not necessitate a fire-and-brimstone approach to God. Dan would see people whose existences would be without the concepts of evil and sin, and this natural life would not need reforming.

Dan's boisterous approach fails to impress one old man. Whether the old man is really in the theater, or is an image in Dan's mind, is unimportant, for he symbolizes that which Dan can never know—the peace of the rooted:

Strange I never really noticed him before.



Been sitting there for years. Born a slave. Slavery not so long ago. He'll die in his chair. Swing low, sweet chariot. Jesus will come and roll him down the river Jordan. Oh, come along, Moses, you'll get lost; stretch out your rod and come across. LET MY PEOPLE GO! old man. Knows everyone who passes the corners. Saw the first horse-cars. The first Oldsmobile. And he was born in slavery. I did see his eyes. Never miss eyes. But they were bloodshot and watery. It hurt to look at them. It hurts to look in most people's eyes.

. . . Strange force that drew me to him. And I went up to see. The woman thought I was crazy. I told him to look into the heavens. He did, and smiled. I asked him if he knew what that rumbling is that comes up from the ground. Christ, what a stroke that was. And the jabbering idiots crowding around. And the crossing-cop leaving his job to come over and wheel him away . . . . (pp. 125-126)

Just as this man puzzles Dan, so, too, does the Negress next to whom Dan sits; such a woman, a woman whose roots mysteriously still run South, mystifies him:

A soil-soaked fragrance comes from her. Through the cement floor her strong roots sink down. They spread under the river and disappear in blood-lines that waver South. Her roots shoot down. Dan's hand follow them. Roots throb. Dan's heart beats violently. He places his palms upon the earth to call them. Earth throbs. Dan's heart beats violently. He sees all the people in the house rush to the walls coming up. Dan comes up. He is startled. The eyes of the woman don't belong to her. They look at him unpleasantly . . . . (p. 119)

By confusing his life with an urge to evangelize,

Dan's drift is even more complicated. Dan fails to recognize the source of his confusion and frustration. He will never enjoy any peace, and certainly the chances of his "saving the world" are nonexistent.

### "BONA AND PAUL"

The aimless drifting of those people who have no roots can be seen again in the final two sketches of Part II, "Theater" and "Bona and Paul." In each sketch the main figures are frustrated in their search for security. Each looks for comfort in physical relationships, and not finding the precious element, continues his life, even more frustrated and totally without hope.

The dominant figure in "Bona and Paul" is a young black man, Paul, who has rejected his own racial identity by his affiliation with Bona, a young fickle white socialite. Paul's dates with Bona are not experiences that offer him any comfort; instead each time that he is with Bona and his other white friends, Paul becomes even more frustrated. He soon learns that his white friends are no more secure than he; they simply manage to convince themselves that they are secure, and Paul is unable to deceive himself.

A strange thing happened to Paul.  
Suddenly he knew that he was apart

from the people around him. Apart from the pain which they had unconsciously caused. Suddenly he knew that people saw, not attractiveness in his dark skin, but difference. Their stares, giving him to himself, filled something long empty within him, and were like blades sprouting in his consciousness. There was fullness, and strength and peace about it all. He saw himself, cloudy, but real. He saw the faces of the people at the tables round him . . . Art and Bona and Helen? He'd look. They were wonderfully flushed and beautiful. Not for himself; because they were. Distantly. Who were they anyway? God, if he knew them. He's come in with them. Of that he was sure. Come in where? Into life? Yes. No. Into the Crimson Gardens. A part of life. A carbon bubble. Would it look purple if he went out into the night and looked at it? (pp. 145-146)

In another reflective moment Paul further questions his role in white university circles. This time his thoughts are laced with peaceful scenes from "down home" and for just a moment he leaves the college of white phonies and escapes to the bosom of his birthplace, the rich, warm South.

I'd like to know you when I look at. Know, not love. Not that knowing is a greater pleasure; but that I have just found the joy of it . . . The color and the music and the song . . . A Negress chants a lullaby beneath the mate-eyes of a Southern planter. O song! . . . And those flushed faces. Eager brilliant eyes. Hard to imagine them as unawakened. Your own. Oh, they're awake all right. "And you know it too, don't you Bona?" (p. 148)



The dream ends in a bitter question as Paul seems to blame Bona for his dilemma; but before he can tell her his dream, the orchestra interrupts him with a warm-up and "the truth of what I was thinking" remains unspoken.

Constantly Bona asks Paul to "Tell me something about yourself . . . . Not what I want to know, Paul; what you want to tell me." (p. 143) Paul becomes frustrated as he realizes that he is unable to tell Bona about himself, because he knows nothing about himself. He only knows what he is not. He is not a man who is at peace with himself, nor is he a man who has a place in the white world. In the final scene one can observe a slight indication of Paul's discovering himself. Paul, in a symbolic conversation between his black "self" and his white "self," learns of the beautiful life he has missed. Even though Paul realizes the importance of his blackness, there is no indication that he will be able to gain the roots that he desperately needs just by claiming kinship with one race or another:

A strange thing happens. He sees the Gardens purple, as if he were way off. And a spot is in the purple. The spot comes furiously towards him. Face of the black man. It leans. It smiles sweetly like a child's . . . I came back to tell you to shake your hand and tell you that you are wrong. That something beautiful is going to happen. That the Gardens are purple like a bed of roses would be at dusk. That I came into the Gardens,



into life in the Gardens with one whom I did not know. That I danced with her, and did not know her. That I felt passion for her whom I did not know. That I thought of her. That my thoughts were matches thrown into a dark window. And all the while the Gardens were purple like a bed of roses would be at dusk. 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)

Even though they cause him added frustration, Paul continues seeing his white friends, especially Bona. Paul, no longer concerned about his own behavior, is so submerged in the collegiate traditions of his peer group that he simply drifts with them. Even his sexual pursuits are conditioned responses lacking all sincere emotion:

She presses away. Paul, conscious of the convention in it, pulls her to him. Her body close. Her head still strains away. He nearly crushes her. She tries to pinch him. Then sees people staring, and lets her arms fall. Their eyes meet. Both contemptuous. The dance takes blood from their 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)

Paul's situation is hopeless, but not because Bona has left him as the sketch ends. The futility of his life is present even before his birth; the problems he

encounters in his lifetime, in particular discovering which race he can identify with, can only awaken him to an awareness of this futility. For Paul to find peace is impossible; for Paul, like his contemporaries in the cities, has no roots.

Paul's problems, as well as those of John and Dorris in "Theater," illustrate the intense despair that one suffers when he has no roots. The despair is greater when the person has a vague sense of what it might be like to be secure. For then he feels that he might possibly obtain this security by a tremendous struggle. The struggle is futile, and when he learns this, as do many of the figures in Part II, his life seems unbearably worthless. To believe that one can gain one's roots, or claim kinship with the roots of one's ancestors, is to disregard Toomer's entire message—that the people of roots belong to a fading age, an age that can never be reconstructed.

### "THEATER"

The imagery used in "Theater" expresses an environment lacking natural beauty. All of the establishments surrounding Howard Theater seem to rely upon their grimy appearances to attract the drifters. Toomer, then, pictures these places—the theaters, restaurants, saloons

and pool rooms—as disgusting to the senses:

Life of nigger alley of pool rooms and restaurants and near-beer saloons soaks into the walls of Howard Theater and sets them throbbing jazz songs. (p. 91)

Just as the setting forces the senses into action, so, too, do the characters. The author has again portrayed rootless people, relying upon their senses to gain hasty moments of security—the element so obviously missing in their lives. As an artist Toomer makes full use of the power of the senses of both his characters and his readers. Such power can be recognized as one reads of John:

John is the manager's brother. He is seated at the center of the theater, just before rehearsal. Light streaks down upon him from a window high above. One half his face is orange in it. One half his face is in shadow. The soft glow of the house rushes to, and compacts about, the shaft of light. John's mind coincides with the shaft of light . . . .

Stage lights, soft, as if they shine through clear pink fingers. Beneath them, hid by the shadow of a set, Dorris. Other chorus girls drift in. John feels them in the mass. And as if his own body were the mass—heart of a black audience listening to them singing, he wants to stamp his feet and shout . . . .

A pianist slips into the pit and improvises jazz. The walls awake. Arms of the girls, and their limbs, which . . . jazz, jazz . . . by lifting up their tight street skirts they set free, jab the air and clog the floor in rhythm to the music. (Lift your skirts, Baby, and talk to papa!) Crude, individualized, and yet . . . monotonous (pp. 91-92)



To John much of his life is one monotonous experience followed by another and another, and then a repetition of the entire cycle. Most of his life centers around the theater and the chorus girls. Having an education does nothing for John's situation. He is trapped by social prejudices which make finding a job impossible for a black man and this dilemma eventually causes him to lose all ambition. Seeking an outlet for his frustrations, John is attracted to Dorris, a chorus girl, but she can offer him only partial escape, and then she, too, becomes part of the monotony:

. . . Above the staleness, one dancer throws herself into it, Dorris. John sees her. Her hair, crisp-curled, is bobbed. Bushy, black hair bobbing about her lemon-colored face. Her lips are curiously full, and very red. Her limbs in silk purple stockings are lovely. John feels them. Desire her, holds off . . . . (94) and then you shirmy. I'll bet she can. Some good cabaret, with rooms upstairs, and what in hell do you think you'd get from it? You're going wrong. Here's right! Get her to herself—(Christ, but how she'd bore you after the first five minutes). (p. 96)

John comes to realize that his only outlet is his imagination, so he, too, like all the rootless people of Part II, begins to dream:

Dorris is dressed in a loose black gown splashed with lemon ribbons. Her feet taper long and slim from trim ankles. She waits for him just inside the stage door. John, collar and tie colorful and flaring, walks



toward the stage door. There are no trees in the alley. But his feet feel as though they step on autumn leaves whose rustle has been pressed out of them by the passing of a million satin slippers. The air is sweet with roasting chestnuts, sweet with bonfires of old leaves. John's melancholy is a deep thing that seals all senses but his eyes, and makes him whole.

Dorris knows that he is coming. Just at the right moment she steps from the door, as if there were no door. Her face is tinted like the autumn alley. Of old flowers, or of a Southern canefield, her perfume "Glorious Dorris." So his eyes speak. And their sadness is too deep for sweet untruth. She barely touches his arm. They glide off with footfalls softened on the leaves, the old leaves powdered by a million satin slippers.

They are in a room. John knows nothing of it. Only, that the flesh and blood of Dorris are its walls. Singing walls. Lights, soft as if they shine through clear pink fingers. Soft lights, and warm.

John reaches for a manuscript of his, and reads. Dorris, who has no eyes, has eyes to understand him. He comes to a dancing scene. The scene is Dorris. She dances. Dorris dances. Glorious Dorris. Dorris whirls, whirls, dances . . .

(pp. 98-99)

John's peaceful dream is shaken by the crash of a piano chord, and one learns from Dorris' reaction to John's reverie that they will never find peace; in particular they will never share harmony:

The pianist crashes a bumper chord. The whole stage claps. Dorris, flushed, looks quick at John. 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)

Most of the imagery of Part II illustrates the car-

nal, animalistic world facing those who lack roots and are consequently dissatisfied with their lives. Gone are the intriguingly vague but natural images describing the women of Part I, such as Marinha, "carrying beauty, perfect as dusk when the sun goes down," or Fern whose "Face flowed into her eyes," or Louisa whose naturally beautiful skin "was the color of oak leaves on young trees." In their place one finds women compared with cold inanimate objects as in the poem "Her Lips are Copper Wire."

whisper of yellow globes  
gleaming on lamp-posts that sway  
like bootleg lick-drinkers in the fog

and let your breath be moist against me  
like bright beads on yellow blobs

telephone the power-house  
that the main wires are insulate

(her words play softly up and down  
dewy corridors of billboards)

then with your tongue remove the tape  
and press your lips to mine  
till they are incandescent (p. 101)

Montgomery Gregory offers an explanation for such a switch in imagery in Part II in his 1923 review of Cane, published in Opportunity:

It must also be said that the style is more labored and sometimes puzzling. One feels at times as if the writer's emotions had out-run his expression. Is it that Mr. Toomer's highest inspiration is to be found in the folk-life of his beloved Southland and that his unmistakable distaste for the cramped and strictly conventionalized life of the city Negro restricts his

power of clear and forceful language? There is not the same easy rhythmic cadence of expression here as in the first division . . . .<sup>4</sup>

The shift in imagery is hardly a flaw in Toomer's work; it is, in fact, a critical artistic device for carrying the theme of Cane. By shifting from the rich, gentle imagery of Part I to the cold, metallic imagery of Part II, Toomer moves from the images of life to those of death—in this case the death of the previous era. It is the images of Part II, not those of Part I, which dominate "Kabnis," in which Toomer, in retouching his "beloved Southland" with the imagery of the city, explains that the penetration of these city traditions into the virgin South is complete.

---

<sup>4</sup>Montgomery Gregory, "Cane," Opportunity (December, 1923, p. 375.

### PART III. "KABNIS": RECOGNITION AND DESPAIR

It is in the final section of Cane that one begins fully to understand Toomer's belief that the age of black peasant tranquility derived from the peasants' sense of roots is a dying age. Throughout the sketches and stories of Part I and Part II Toomer illustrates, first, what one experiences by having roots, and, second, what life style one faces when he has lost these roots. Now in "Kabnis," the final section of Cane, Toomer dramatizes the finality of losing one's roots by illustrating the futility that exists in the attempt to regain them.

The story of Ralph Kabnis is the story of a man whose life in a Northern city is plagued by the same frustrations facing Paul of "Bona and Paul," John of "Theater," the narrator of "Avey," and Dan Moore of "Box Seat." Ralph Kabnis differs from these characters, however, as he attempts to eliminate the cause of his frustrations by returning to the land of his ancestors. There, Kabnis faces despair—the despair that occurs when one returns to the source of his roots, desperately seeking kinship, and instead finds only that his quest has been futile, because spiritual roots can not be re-



established once they are torn from the soil.

As the drama opens, one observes Ralph Kabnis attracted to, and yet obviously afraid of, the very land in which he hopes to find peace. Instead of peace Kabnis finds hostility, and hints of the hostility awaiting him are evident even in his relationship with the natural environment:

. . . A hen, on a shelf in the adjoining room begins to tread. Her nails scrape the soft wood. Her feathers ruffle. "Get out of that, you egg-laying bitch." Kabnis hurls a slipper against the wall. The hen flies from her perch and cackles as if a skunk were after her.

"Now cut out that racket or I'll wring your neck for you." Answering cackles arise in the chicken yard.

"Why in Christ's hell can't you leave me alone? Damn it, I wish your cackle would choke you. Choke every mother's son of them in this God-forsaken hole. Go away. By God I'll wring your neck for you if you don't. Hell of a mess I've got in: even the poultry is hostile . . . (p. 159)

. . . Kabnis is about to shake his fists heavenward. He looks up, and the night's beauty strikes him dumb. He falls to his knees . . .

"God Almighty, dear God, do not torture me with beauty. Take it away. Give me an ugly world. Ha, ugly. Stinking like unwashed niggers. Dear Jesus, do not chain me to myself and set these hills and valleys, heaving with folk-song, so close to me that I cannot reach them. There is a radiant beauty in the night that touches and . . . tortures me. Ugh, Hell. Get up, you damn fool. Look around. Whats beautiful there? Hog pens and chicken yards. Dirty red mud. Stinking outhouses. Whats beauty anyway

but ugliness if it hurts you? God, he doesn't exist, but nevertheless He is ugly. Lynchers and businessmen, and that cockroach Hanby, especially. (pp. 161-162)

Kabnis's relationship with Hanby, the principal of the school where he teaches, is also hostile. Hanby is contemptuously pictured as "a well-dressed, smooth rich, black-skinned Negro who thinks there is no one quite so suave and polished as himself. To members of his own race, he affects the manners of a wealthy white planter."

Frightened with the hostile surroundings and frustrated by his fear, Kabnis accepts a drink of liquor from Halsey in an effort to tranquilize himself. However, drinking on school property is forbidden, and in flagrant remonstrance Hanby asserts his self-deemed importance by giving Kabnis a tongue lashing. Such treatment from one so corrupted as Hanby causes Kabnis to seek other employment. His idea of teaching as an occupation while trying to gain his roots is an absurdity in itself. Kabnis's teaching could only be founded on the knowledge he had acquired while living in the traditions of the city. For him to expect to learn of the natural existence he would have to abandon his urban culture, another impossibility, and act, not as teacher, but as student.

Despite Kabnis's failure to find roots, one does not finish the drama believing Toomer's only intention is to create despair. More importantly, Toomer's purpose is to

describe an era that, while dying, is not yet dead. Throughout "Kabnis" one notices the prose of bitter sentiment clashing with the peaceful prose used to describe the few rural Negroes who are still at peace. At times Kabnis is nostalgically affected and envious of these few:

He forces himself to a narrow cabin silhouetted on a knoll about a mile away. Peace, Negroes within it are content. They farm. They sleep. Kabnis wonders if perhaps they can feel him. If perhaps he gives them bad dreams. Things are so immediate in Georgia. (p. 164)

The immediacy of Georgia is further reflected in a description of a Georgia evening. So appealing is this image that Kabnis's desire to be a part of the peaceful life is understandable:

Night, soft belly of a pregnant Negress, throbs evenly against the torso of the South. Night throbs a womb-song to the South. Cane and cotton-fields, pine forests, Cypress swamps, sawmills, and factories are fecund at her touch. Night's womb-song sets them singing. Night winds are the breathing of the unborn child whose calm throbbing in the belly of a Negress sets them somnolently singing. Hear this song.

White man's land  
Niggers, sing  
Burn, bear black children  
Fill poor rivers bring  
Rest, and sweet glory  
In Camp Ground. (pp. 200-209)

Regardless of Kabnis's desire to be aligned with these people of roots, one never learns of his meeting



with any of them. In fact, Kabnis's associates seem to be people without any roots at all. They differ from Kabnis, though, since most of them are unaware that they are without roots; they are therefore unable to verbalize the reasons for their frustrations.

Fred Halsey, for example, uses his wagon shop and wraps himself in the tradition of the horse-and-buggy era as a shield against the automotive takeover soon to be complete. Fred takes great pride in attempting to instruct Kabnis in the old ways, but, as one should note, Kabnis is unable to learn these ways:

Halsey directs Kabnis, showing him how to place the handle in the vise, and cut it down. The knife hangs. Kabnis thinks that it must be dull. He jerks it hard. The tool goes deep and shaves too much off. Mr. Ramsay smiles brokenly at him.

Mr. Ramsay (to Halsey): Still breakin in the new hand, eh, Halsey? Seems like a likely enough faller once he gets th hang of it.

He gives a tight laugh at his own good-humor. Kabnis burns red. The back of his neck stings him beneath his collar. He feels stifled. Though Ramsay, the whole white South weighs down upon him. The pressure is terrific. He sweats under the arms. Chill beads run down his body. His brows concentrate upon the handle as though his own life was staked upon the perfect shaving of it. He begins to cut and cut botch the job. Halsey smiles . . .

Kabnis is hopeless. Halsey takes the handle from him. With a few deft strokes he shaves it. Fits it. Gives it to Ramsey. (pp. 201-202)

Halsey's idle shop, a remnant of the fading era,



is the meeting place for many townsmen. These people, whom Kabnis meets, seems to be as rootless as Kabnis. Lewis, the young Northern Negro, is determined to stay in Georgia a month despite threats upon his life. The hostility that the other rootless blacks use in attempting to force this stranger to leave illustrates that the same prejudices that are held by white Northerners are shared by the blacks of Southern towns, the most obvious being the violence that one elicits from himself when he fears the unknown. To these people Lewis is strange and though they know very little about him, their ignorance forces them to fear him, to resent him, and finally to hate him. Their fear, then, leads them to such tactics as attaching a threatening note to a rock and hurling it through a window. Such an incident, which upsets Kabnis greatly when he feels that the note is meant for him, clearly parallels similar incidents that face the black man as he tries to merge with the white society of the North. Lewis's ability to survive in such an alien and hostile environment proves that "he is what a stronger Kabnis might have been . . ." Toomer employs this characteristic, strength, in causing Kabnis to be attracted to Lewis. Even though Lewis is the stronger, Kabnis's role is of more importance to the theme of Cane, and Lewis is able to perceive this importance.

His eyes turn to Kabnis. In the instant of their shifting, a vision of the life they are to meet. Kabnis, a promise of a soil-soaked beauty uprooted, thinning out. Suspended a few feet above the soil whose touch would resurrect him . . . (p. 191)

Lewis is never able to help Kabnis gain strength, and losing hope of ever "touching ground," Kabnis begins to exhibit qualities that make Toomer consider his main character a hopeless man.

One cannot dwell long enough upon the loveliness which describes the rural Southland, yet as the drama progresses, Kabnis, who at one time even regards the frame church on the hill as an object of natural beauty, begins to look upon the scene with disgust. The singing Negroes, too, become disgusting and their songs are no longer melodious or intriguingly plaintive; rather, Kabnis feels that the people are simply shouting and screaming. For the man who once said of the South, "things are not half bad . . . all these people wouldn't stay down here . . . if conditions were so mighty bad." (p. 171) Kabnis now has changed his opinion of this land, and seeing the impossibility of being offered solace here, wants nothing to do with the now repugnant environment:

Singing from the church becomes audible. Above it, rising and falling in a plaintive moan, a woman's voice swells to shouting. Kabnis hears it. His face gives way to an

expression of mingled fear, contempt and pity . . .

Halsey: Lets go t church, eh Kabnis?

Kabnis (seeking control): All--no sir, not by a damn sight. Once a days enough for me. Christ, but that stuff gets to me . . .

Halsey: . . . Say, Kabnis, noticed y this morn'ing. What'd y get up for an go out?

Kabnis: Couldn't stand the shouting, and thats a fact. We don't have that sort of thing up North. (p. 175)

The flock of buzzards, birds of ill-omen hovering over the path to the church, darkly suggests the fate of these people, the rooted black peasants of rural Georgia. These people, representing an entire era of people who are at peace with themselves and are united harmoniously with their soil, are, in Cane, rapidly declining in the South. More and more, their sons are moving to cities or towns, leaving only the older rooted generations to enjoy the rural tranquility. Kabnis's attempt to be a part of this tranquility fails and, as the drama--and Cane--closes, he and the reader realize that this peace of spirit, which for generations sustained his ancestors, will never be his.



## SOURCES CONSULTED

### BOOKS AND MANUSCRIPTS

- Bone, Robert. The Negro Novel in America. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958.
- Hill, Herbert, ed. Anger and Beyond. New York: Harper & Row, 1966.
- Littlejohn, David. Black on White: A Critical Survey of Writing by American Negroes. New York: The Viking Press, 1966.
- Margolies, Edward. Native Sons: A Critical Study of Twentieth-Century Negro American Authors. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1969.
- Toomer, Jean. Cane. Perennial Classic. New York: Harper & Row, 1969.
- Toomer, Jean. Cane. Foreward by Frank Waldo. New York: Boni & Liveright, 1923.
- Toomer, Jean. "Outline of Autobiography in Eight Books," (Unpublished m.s., n.d.) Toomer Papers, Fisk University Library.
- Toomer, Jean. "From Exile Into Being," (Unpublished m.s., 1938) Toomer Papers, Fisk University Library.
- Toomer, Jean. "Race Problems and Society," (Unpublished m.s., n.d.) Fisk University Library, Box 26, #4.
- Toomer, Jean. "Life's Center" Essentials: Prose and Poems. (Unpublished m.s., n.d.) Box 57, #5.
- Toomer, Jean. "The Power of Images," (Unpublished m.s., 1937) Box 24, #25.



## PERIODICALS

DuBois, W. E. B. and Alain Locke. "The Younger Literary Movement," Crisis, XXVII (1924), 161-63.

Fullinwider, S. P. "Jean Toomer: Lost Generation, or Negro Renaissance?" Phylon, XXVII (1966), 396-403.

Gregory, Montgomery. "Cane," Opportunity, I (1923), 374-75.

Munson, Corlan. "The Significance of Jean Toomer," Opportunity, III (1925), 262-63.

Turner, Darwin T. "Jean Toomer's Cane." Negro Digest, XVIII (January, 1969), 54-61.