Jean Toomer's Cane: A Work in the American Grotesque Genre

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Thesis Abstract

In my thesis I will discuss the fact that Jean Toomer's *Cane* is a grotesque work, one which in several ways resembles Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*. While Jean Toomer never specifically alludes to any of the characters in *Cane* as grotesques, they consistently exhibit three of the strongest, most characteristic elements of the grotesque: physical and/or psychic deformities, alienation from the reader/viewer, and, most importantly, unrelenting conflict from two opposing elements. In fact, the figures in *Cane* show even more development of grotesque themes than the characters in *Winesburg, Ohio*, a collection known for its portrayals of modern American grotesques.

I will first discuss the current, modern interpretation of the term "grotesque" as it applies to the arts, referring to established texts on the subject such as Wolfgang Kayser's *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, Philip Thomson's *The Grotesque*, and William Van O'Connor's 'The Grotesque: An American Genre' and Other Essays. I will then explain with reference to *Winesburg, Ohio*, how *Cane* exhibits the three major grotesque characteristics, beginning with physical abnormalities, following that with character alienation from reader, and concluding with unremitting disharmony.
Jean Toomer's *Cane*: A Work in the American Grotesque Genre

Kathryn M. Olsen
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Critics have noted a number of characteristics shared by Jean Toomer’s *Cane* (1923) and Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919): in a letter to Anderson, John McClure praises the incredible “lyrical genius” of both Toomer and Anderson, but admits that when it comes to dialogue, both writers fail in their attempts to portray realistic conversation accurately.¹ Darwin T. Turner mentions that *Cane* and *Winesburg, Ohio* share thematic and stylistic qualities.² And, finally, there is still debate in some minds as to the proper classification of these two works: are they collections of short stories or are they novels (or, in *Cane*’s case, is it poetry)?

One comparison I intend to discuss is the fact that Jean Toomer’s *Cane* is a grotesque work, one which in several ways resembles *Winesburg, Ohio* in terms of grotesque themes. It is evident, certainly, that Anderson’s intent was to recount the lives of the odd persons whom he characterized as grotesques; the prologue to *Winesburg, Ohio*, titled “The Book of the Grotesque,” tells of an old man who writes “hundreds of pages” (24) dealing with “all of the men and women [he] had ever known” (23) who have become grotesques in the old man’s mind. These men and women develop into the citizens of the imaginary Midwestern town of Winesburg. Even though Toomer does not allude to his characters as grotesques, they do consistently exhibit three of the strongest, most
characteristic elements of the grotesque: physical and/or psychic deformities, alienation from the reader/viewer, and, most importantly, unrelenting conflict from two opposing elements. In fact, the figures in *Cane* are more fully developed as grotesques that the characters in *Winesburg, Ohio*, a collection known for its portrayals of modern American grotesques.

The definition and interpretation of the word "grotesque" have vacillated considerably over the centuries. Originally, the concept of the grotesque stemmed from artwork from the early Christian period of the Romans: geological excavations performed circa A.D. 1500 uncovered paintings displaying elaborate intertwinnings of human, animal, and vegetable forms. This ornamental style obtained its name from the Italian "grotte" (or "cave" -- thus leading to "excavation") and over the centuries evolved from the noun "grottesca" to the French "crotesque" (1532) to the English "grotesque," which first appeared in 1640. During the centuries between the Renaissance and the Twentieth Century, the term, in both art and literature, carried a number of meanings: the ominous and the sinister, the ridiculous and the burlesque, and, more significantly, a combination of the comic and the horrible, almost always evidenced by some sort of physical deformity.

The emphasis on the physical is still important in the concept of the modern grotesque. The grotesque of the
Twentieth Century, however, need not resemble a monster or gargoyle; instead, the author/narrator may repeatedly emphasize one action or physical feature of a character (in Winesburg, Ohio, Dr. Reefy's habit of wadding bits of paper into tiny pellets, or, in Cane, Fern's eyes, which "hold God"). This technique thrusts the character's presence into the reader's awareness. The author's emphasis on the odd physical trait or tic, if frequent enough, can dehumanize the character and turn him into a puppet-like or cartoon figure. This marionette or mask motif, which is a common theme in the grotesques, according to Wolfgang Kayser, is both comic and eerily unnerving at the same time. The reader/viewer sees a figure who is significantly less than human: this creature performing the clownish, exaggerated actions was once human, yet is now reduced to a wooden, emotionless machine or toy.

A second major point in the definition of the grotesque concerns the alienation of the reader from the character. The narrative persona is also crucial to the alienation of the grotesque character, for it is through the eyes of the narrator that the reader sees the character. The author, by means of the narrative voice, presents to the reader a figure different, sometimes shockingly so, from the reader himself or from anything the reader may have previously encountered. Similarly, the narrator's depiction of the grotesque's world may throw the reader off-balance. The primary response is often confusion at precisely how to
react as the reader's accustomed comfortable world is transformed suddenly into one where traditional values or beliefs have been twisted or disposed of altogether. Because this new world is so foreign, the reader cannot help but feel estranged from it; thus, this particular type of world and its inhabitants appear as grotesque.

There are two major methods of presentation that an author via his narrator can use as methods of estranging the reader from the character, according to Wolfgang Kayser's *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*. The first involves showing the character's environment as if through the eyes of a daydreamer or through a dream, a technique that Jean Toomer uses quite often, especially in the first section of *Cane*. The alternative method deals with the presentation of the world as seen through a cold, distanced eye that offers "an impassioned view of life on earth as empty, meaningless, 'puppet play'" (Kayser 47). In sketches such as "Rhobert," "Box Seat," and "Kabnis," from the second and third sections of *Cane*, characters are portrayed as perfunctorily performing the motions of day-to-day living without any apparent mental involvement.

Consequently, if the narrator uses either a dreamy or a cold style to present a character, the reader will have a difficult time getting an objective view of the character. These two presentational styles serve as a means of estranging the reader from the character, thus adding to the character's grotesque qualities.
A final significant point in the definition of the grotesque concerns the unrelenting conflict within the grotesque figure. According to Philip Thomson, author of *The Grotesque*, the modern interpretation of the grotesque has come to mean, at least in part, "an unresolved clash of incompatibles." These "incompatibles" may range widely, from emotional conflicts such as love/hate and loyalty/rebellion to conflicting outer elements like rural versus urban life, agricultural versus mechanical society, and so on. America's move from an agricultural to an industrial society is an ideal situation in which to establish a grotesque conflict. Toomer's Northern and Southern settings create unremitting conflicts for his characters. The stories in *Cane* contain figures like Muriel (from "Box Seat") and Ralph Kabnis, who battle with internal and external chaos due to their attempts at adapting to the modern environment of the large cities (such as Chicago and Washington) in the North. These figures are grotesque because they never reach any sort of peace or stable compromise with their warring, opposing emotions or with the incompatible outside elements.

At a mention of the word "grotesque," the image of a monstrous-looking creature will undoubtedly appear in one's mind; certainly many grotesques of the past were physically horrible. Today the physical or psychological deformity is still a standard feature of the grotesque, but perhaps not as overwhelming as it once was. The characters in Sherwood
Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* can be categorized as grotesques in terms of their physical habits or appearances. Anderson frequently portrays various parts of characters' bodies (especially hands) as being larger-than-life, and, secondly, as having minds of their own, as if their owner had no control over their actions. The reader of "Hands" learns that "the story of Wing Biddlebaum is the story of hands" (28), and further descriptions of Wing's hands reveal that they seem to function independently of their owner: during a conversation with the town's reporter, George Willard, Wing "for once... forgot his hands. Slowly they stole forth and lay upon George Willard's shoulders" (30). "The hands alarmed their owner. He wanted to keep them hidden away and looked with amazement at the quiet inexpressive hands of other men" (29).

Similarly, the story "The Philosopher" has two characters who have odd physical traits. The first figure, Dr. Parcival, not only has teeth that are "black and irregular" (49), but "the lid of the left eye twitched; it fell down and snapped up; it was exactly as though the lid of the eye were a shade and someone stood inside the doctor's head playing with the cord" (49). The saloon keeper in this same sketch has hands marred by birthmarks, mottled red splotches that grow more vivid in color every time their owner gets upset. Tom Foster's grandmother (in "Drink") also claims a pair of strange hands: "her hands were all twisted out of shape. When she took hold of a mop
or a broom handle the hands looked like the dried stems of
an old creeping vine clinging to a tree" (210). Anderson's
emphasis on characteristics such as these makes each
Winesburger stand out from "normal" people. However, the
fact that Anderson describes the curious hands, eyes, and
other features as being independent from their owners makes
their owners all the more grotesque, for these characters' inabilities to control their own bodies makes them seem
less human.

Jean Toomer's *Cane* shares with *Winesburg, Ohio* its
author's repeated attention to the odd physical traits of
its characters. However, while the deformities of the
Winesburgers show evidence of their owners' attempts at
human contact (Rev. Curtis Hartman's window-peeking, Wing's
hands instinctively reaching out towards others), the
abnormalities in the figures from *Cane* are much colder and
eerier. Toomer assigns his characters death-like
qualities, characteristics that distance or remove them
from their environment. In the case of Fernie May Rosen,
it is her eyes that are her disconcerting feature: they are
eyes into which everything (her face, the countryside, and
God) flow, but out of which nothing ever comes.
Particularly in the second and third sections of *Cane*,
Toomer gives his characters cartoonish characteristics:
Ralph Kabnis appears as a scarecrow-like figure, always
quivering and smudged with dirt and bits of hay, and
Rhobert becomes, a drowning diver wearing a gigantic helmet, an object that specifically adds to his cartoon-like image.

Physically grotesque characters are exhibited not only in the stories, but also in the poems from Cane. For example, the first poem in Part I, "Reapers," at first appears to be little more than a well-worded poem about black field hands performing a day's labor. Toomer moves from the unthreatening image of horses pulling mowers through the fields to, suddenly, the sight of a field rat who has been sliced by the mower blades. The most chilling moment follows as the narrator ends calmly, "I see the blade,/blood-stained, continue cutting weeds and shade" (3). While the reader may retreat in mild shock or disgust at the image of a bloody field rat, the narrator is apparently unaffected by it; his unexpectedly cool tone at the end of "Reapers" gives the work a twist of the grotesque.

"Face," another poem from the first section, also begins innocently enough, with lyrical descriptions such as "Hair-/silver-gray,/like streams of stars..." (8). However, Toomer soon begins moving toward more disturbing images, making references to pain and tears. By the end of the poem, this unnamed woman's face has become a grotesque object, for "her channeled muscles/ are cluster grapes of sorrow/ purple in the evening sun/ nearly ripe for worms" (8). Toomer's swift, smooth shift from beauty to horror is once again unexpected and unsettling.
One character from the first section of *Cane* whose distorted physical characteristic is not so much physically as mentally disturbing is Fern. Her intriguing, mysterious eyes almost become a deformity, the narrator's fascination with them is so intense. According to the male narrator in "Fern," one always returned to Fern's eyes when viewing her, as if her entire being was summed up in them. The narrator's -- as well as the townspeople's -- interest with Fern's eyes could be dismissed as simply a physical appreciation of them, were it not for the fact that almost every mention of Fern is followed with a reference to them: "Anyone, of course, could see her, could see her eyes" (15) and "like her face, the whole countryside seemed to flow into her eyes" (15).

Toomer's focus on this particular trait of Fern's is not a horrific one, as is the case with some of his grotesques. Her eyes, which take in everything but give out nothing in return except what people want to read in them, make Fern more mysterious than frightening. Her eyes set her apart from her fellow Georgians; in fact, the messages that men read in her eyes ("She did not deny them, yet the fact was that they were denied"[14]) make them beatify Fern and turn her, at least in their own minds, into a virgin because of her mental unapproachability. Fern's transformation into a virgin adds to her grotesqueness, for technically she is anything but a virgin.
The following story, called "Esther," contains darker, more death-like imagery than does "Fern." "Esther" is the tale of an almost-white girl who is mesmerized by and then infatuated with a black preacher named King Barlo. Toomer makes Esther a physically grotesque figure by repeating deathly images of her throughout the story. As if Esther the child is already a corpse, even her cheeks "are too flat and dead for a girl of nine" (22). As Esther reaches her twenties, her hair is thinning, her body "lean and beaten" (22), and "her face pales until it is the color of the gray dust that dances with the dead cotton leaves" (23).

Esther's withdrawal from the outside world into one composed of her fantasies results in her going through the motions of "real life" (e.g. working at the grocery store) like an automaton, and her "eyes hardly see the people to whom she gives change" (23). The few human qualities she may still possess, Esther tries to stifle. During a midnight walk to the whorehouse where Barlo her dream lover is staying, Esther attempts to calm her mind (which is nearly numb already): "The wind is still blowing, but to her it is a steady, settled thing like the cold. She wants her mind to be like that. Solid, contained, and blank as a sheet of darkened ice" (24). Toomer's repeated emphasis on such images serves to qualify Esther as a grotesque, in terms of a psychic deformity, for the aura of death is
ever-present in this young woman who seems more like a walking corpse than a living, breathing person.

Another work from Part I of Cane that contains death imagery is the poem "Portrait in Georgia". This short piece contains sobering references to death and pain in almost every line. This woman's braided hair has become "coiled like a lynchers rope" (27), her lips scars or blisters, and her "slim body, white as the ash/ of black flesh after flame" (27).

The second section of Cane also exhibits a number of physically-grotesque figures. "Rhobert" is the story of a man who has migrated from a small Southern town to a large Northern city and now cannot cope with the financial burdens that this new lifestyle entails. Toomer portrays the title character as a figure of mythical proportions who shoulders a giant house upon his head like a gigantic diver's helmet; this "diver" is slowly drowning from the pressures not only of the house/helmet, but also from the surrounding water (which symbolizes life, according to the story), which would crush Rhobert "the minute that he pulled his head out" (40) from the helmet. Here Toomer creates a portrait of a man who has become like a mindless, helpless insect, an alarming caricature who no longer seems human: the house that burdens Rhobert's shoulders sports "rods...like antennae of a dead thing, stuffed" (40).

An almost-comic description of Rhobert's Adam's apple gulping in air is reminiscent of a puppet or a jester
performing solely for laughs; the subject swiftly turns horrible again, however, when the reader discovers that the air this figure is swallowing is "air floating shredded life pulp" (40) and that the "shaky, ricket-legged man strains the raw insides of his throat against the smooth air" (40). Toomer reduces this man to a mere grotesque stick figure who flails about helplessly in the mud, unable to save himself from drowning.

"Box Seat," also from the middle section of Cane, contains several figures to whom Toomer assigns grotesque physical characteristics. Muriel, a young black woman, is torn between following the drives of her natural instincts and obeying the new, strict social mores she must conform to in order to assimilate into the white-run society of the large Northern city in which she resides. Muriel appears at times to be a robot in her speech and actions: the words spout from her lips, but there does not seem to be any emotion or fresh thought attached to them. For example, when her friend Dan Moore tries to talk to her about living more for herself and less for social etiquette, Muriel automatically responds with lines such as: "Why dont [sic] you get a good job and settle down...you musnt [sic] say that, Dan. It isnt [sic] right" (59). She even informs Dan that he ought to "work more and think less. Thats [sic] the best way to get along" (59).

Besides portraying Muriel as a character well on her way to becoming mechanical, Toomer combines in her both the
comic and the ugly—two elements that would not commonly be thought of as paired—as he shows Muriel’s struggle to hide her still-live passions and resist Dan’s efforts to bring her back to her natural, primitive, sensual self:

Muriel’s mouth works in and out. Her eyes flash and waggle. She wrenches her hands loose and forces them against his (Dan’s) breast to keep him off. Dan grabs her wrists. Wedges in between her arms. Her face is close to him. It is hot and blue and moist. Ugly. (60)

Mrs. Pribby, the landlady in "Box Seat," can be viewed as a completed version of the Muriel who is just starting to become a hardened product of the city. There is no doubt that any human feeling or goodness in Mrs. Pribby has long been extinguished. She resembles not so much a human as she does a chillingly efficient machine. Toomer consistently uses harsh, cold, metallic imagery to describe this grotesque creature: "Mrs. Pribby retreats to the rear of the house. She takes up a newspaper. There is a sharp click as she fits into her chair and draws it to the table. The click is metallic, like the sound of a bolt being shot into place" (57). Toomer also employs parallel descriptions of Pribby’s boarding house, as well as other houses in the city: "The house contracts about him [Dan Moore]. It is a sharp-edged, massed, metallic house. Bolted. About Mrs. Pribby. Bolted to the endless rows of metal houses" (57). Mrs. Pribby has become a faceless creature like the houses that surround her. She resembles
a grotesque stone gargoyle, looming coldly, silently over a city, or in this case, over Muriel, who seems destined to follow Pribby's model.

In the final tale in Cane, Jean Toomer offers the reader a physically comic grotesque. "Kabnis," which is set in rural Georgia, is the story of Ralph Kabnis, a Northern-educated Negro who returns to the South as a teacher to discover his roots. Unfortunately, Ralph cannot relax at his new post, for his Northern intellectual side will not let him enjoy or understand the conventions of the South of his ancestors; consequently, Kabnis is constantly starting in fright at the sound of a chicken scratching on the dirt floor of his shack, and he lives with an irrational fear of being lynched by a group of whites. Again, Toomer uses the grotesque method of portraying a character in two contrasting lights simultaneously. Like Rhobert, Kabnis' actions are cartoonish, stiff, and humorous—humorous at least until one realizes that this clownish figure is paralyzed by his own fears. Passages such as the following resemble a pantomime routine—no sound, just visual humor:

A splotchy figure drives forward along the cane- and corn-stalk hemmed-in road. A scare-crow replica of Kabnis, awkwardly animate. It skirts the big house whose windows shine like mellow lanterns in the dusk. Its shoulder jogs against a sweet-gum tree. The figure caroms off against the cabin door, and lunges in. It slams the door as if to prevent someone from entering after it. (91)
A humorous way to begin the third section of "Kabnis," until one sees that this wild scarecrow is actually a man so stricken with fear that he must desperately thrust at every crevice in his cabin with a broom to reassure himself that he is temporarily "safe."

Toomer's choice to depict Kabnis as a scarecrow is appropriate in this story set in Georgia. A common sight in the fields of the South, this straw-stuffed figure's purpose is to appear human in order to frighten birds away from the crops. Kabnis is very like a scarecrow himself, for not only does he physically resemble one (always brushing dirt and hay off his tattered clothes), but he is also as empty as the scarecrow emotionally. Toomer also portrays Kabnis as an artificial man in other ways. For example, after describing the school teacher as one who "totters as a man who would for the first time use artificial limbs" (83), Toomer follows with "as a completely artificial man would" (83). Kabnis may look the part of a man, but Jean Toomer depicts him as less than so because of his ongoing battle with his conflicting values and ideas.

Although the presence of a physical or mental abnormality is a standard characteristic of the modern grotesque, the theme of alienation is a second crucial point in any discussion of the grotesque. In literature of the grotesque, the reader is estranged from the character's world; this figure's environment is foreign, unsettling, or
scary enough that the reader cannot relate to it and thus feels alienated from both the protagonist and his world. Grotesque figures often appear removed from other characters in their environment, a circumstance that in turn alienates them even more from the reader; if the author shows the character only through the eyes of one person (the narrator) and not from the viewpoints of any of the surrounding characters (or if the main character does not interact with anyone around him), the reader may feel he is getting an incomplete or biased view of the main figure.

Sherwood Anderson’s method of having the Winesburgers unconsciously use their abnormalities as a means of non-verbal communication helps to establish the theme of alienation in *Winesburg, Ohio*. An important point to remember (and one in which *Cane* differs from *Winesburg, Ohio*) is that while the citizens of Winesburg are generally loners with odd habits, they are still human enough to long for some form of communication with others. Their strivings to form relationships are pathetically evident by the actions that their bodies resort to: Wing’s hands fluttering uncontrollably to “say” what his lips cannot; Alice Hindman (of “Adventure”) running naked into the rainy night, seeking the love and companionship that her stifling life behind the dry goods counter will not allow. In his essay “The Book of the Grotesque,” Irving Howe points out that the grotesques in *Winesburg, Ohio* search out George
Willard, the town’s reporter, in whom they seek a means of re-entering life; through George and his skill with words, the grotesques hope to be able to express their own thoughts aloud. Unfortunately, these tormented figures are never able to elucidate fully their longings for human interaction to young George Willard; because they cannot reach any kind of stable relationship with anyone, the Winesburg grotesques resort to drunkenness, perversion, and inarticulateness as a way of life.  

While the figures from both Winesburg, Ohio and Cane are distanced from the reader, those from Cane appear far more alienated than the likes of Elizabeth Willard or Dr. Reefy. The Winesburgers at least attempt to escape their lonely worlds by trying to articulate their thoughts, whereas many of the figures in the Cane stories (especially the women) do not even try to communicate with anyone. The reader is shown no motivations for many of the characters’ actions (such as Karintha’s leaving her newborn baby to die in the forest).

One feature that Toomer uses differently than does Sherwood Anderson is the narrative voice. While the narrator from Winesburg, Ohio relates the lives of the grotesques to the reader, he is not responsible for alienating the reader from the character. Jean Toomer, on the other hand, uses an intrusive narrative voice, a device that aids in estranging the reader from the characters in Cane. In the first and most of the second sections of
Cane, the narrative persona makes judgments on the actions of characters and sometimes interrupts the stories with comments addressed directly to the reader. This intrusive narrative technique leaves the reader uncertain as to how to respond to the figures in the sketches. Additionally, the reader is privy to the thoughts of the characters in Winesburg, Ohio, whereas the author/narrator of Cane does not expose the minds of the characters nearly as much as does Anderson; thus, the reader of Cane has a difficult task in trying to determine what motivates the characters' actions.

An important device used to establish this second major grotesque concept of alienation is the author's use of the narrative voice. Toomer frequently chooses a dreamy, almost languid narrative style, especially in the first section of Cane. Portraying a character through a dream or through the eyes of a dreamer serves to distance the reader, for the dreamy tone adds an air of unreality to the story. Toomer also uses a colder, more removed narrative persona as a means of putting a wall between reader and character(s).

In the first story in Cane, titled "Karintha," lines such as "Karintha's running was a whir. It had the sound of the red dust that sometimes makes a spiral in the road" (1) and "she who carried beauty, perfect as dusk when the sun goes down" (1) give the impression of a simple woman who is close to the earth. However, the narrator also
informs the reader that "already, rumors were out about her" (1), "she has been married many times" (1) (i.e. she has had many sexual relations), and that "a child fell out of her womb onto a bed of pine-needles in the forest. Pine-needles are smooth and sweet. They are elastic to the feet of rabbits" (2). In this distanced, unemotional way of representing Karintha, the narrator offers the reader no real clues as to how to react to this young woman's story. Should she be labeled as cold and unfeeling, even evil, for abandoning her own child? Or is Karintha just an innocent who was watched by all the old men and boys for too long? The narrator does not allow any views of the "inner" Karintha to penetrate the story via dialogue or thoughts, thus producing an estrangement between reader and character.

As in Hieronymus Bosch's "Garden of Lust," where the figures being tortured by bizarre human and animal creatures seem strangely unaffected, even indifferent to their surroundings, so is Karintha presented by Toomer's narrator as seemingly removed from her own environment. Although Bosch's fantastic garden may seem completely different from Karintha's world in rural Georgia, both alienate the reader/viewer: neither Bosch the painter nor Toomer the writer offers any indicators as to how one should receive these two worlds. Thus, the Karintha figure is grotesque in the sense that she and her world are
alienated from the reader and his world, in this case due to the presentation of her by the story's narrator.

In "Becky," also from Part I, the reader may be thrown off guard by the tone of the narrator. One is told what the townsfolk, both white and black, have to say about the white Becky and her two mulatto sons; however, the narrator's way of using lines such as "'damn buck nigger' said the white folks' mouths" (5) and "'poor Catholic poor-white crazy woman' said the black folks' mouths" (5) distances him from Becky: he is simply repeating what has been whispered about her by others, not anything which he knows to be true about her.

Additionally, Toomer reveals a gap between what the mouths of the gossipers are saying and what their thoughts about Becky actually are. Their words may not match their inner thoughts, for "the folks from town took turns, unknown, of course, to each other, in bringing corn and meat and sweet potatoes [to Becky]" (5). The reader wonders how much of what these people and the narrator say about Becky and her sons is true.

Another technique that enhances Becky's remoteness from the reader is Toomer's repeated use of fragments of Gospel-or hymn-like lines, which he weaves throughout the pages of the story ("the pines whisper to Jesus...O fly away to Jesus..." [6]). This particular method makes Becky's story seem at times like a half-remembered dream. It is almost as if the inhabitants of the "Becky cabin" do
not exist; one only reads what others presume about Becky and how the pines "whisper to Jesus" about this woman and her situation.

Even near the end of the story, when the tempo builds and the narrator finally begins to show some emotion (fright) toward Becky, the reader still does not get any closer to discovering anything tangible about her, except the fact that the chimney collapses into her cabin. Becky's story fades away in the same dreamy manner in which it began: with a repetition of the opening lines: "Becky was the white woman who had two Negro sons. She's dead; they're gone away. The Bible flaps its leaves with an aimless rustle on her mound" (7).

The narrator's distance from the character is again evident in the third sketch from Part I, titled "Carma." Here, the narrator informs the reader that "Carma's tale is the crudest melodrama" (11). In her article "The Spectatorial Artist and the Structure of Cane," Susan L. Blake suggests that the phrase "crudest melodrama" implies both "sensational events and hollow characters" (520). The characters, particularly Carma, are indeed hollow, for once again the narrator is an outsider to their thoughts and feelings. His detachment from the story is evident, according to Blake, by his insensitive use of the word "melodrama" to describe Carma's world, and also by the fact that when he spots Carma traveling down the Dixie Pike, he follows her, but only with his eyes (521). This action
suggests his distance from Carma physically as well as mentally.

Toomer shifts narrative styles in "Carma" back and forth from concrete descriptions to his familiar dreamy tone, thus preventing the reader from obtaining more than a too-brief glimpse of Carma; for example, he invites the observer into scenes filled with short, poignant images such as "Smoke curls up [from the sawmill]...marvelous web spun by the spider sawdust pile...dust takes polish from the rails" (10). The images then segue into more fantastic ones, and suddenly the present fuses with the past:

From far away, a sad strong song. Pungent 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 flares...juju men, greegree, witch-doctors...torches go out...the Dixie Pike has grown from a goat path in Africa. (10)

The narrator then abruptly shifts the mood by discussing the bare facts of Carma’s life—her strength, her husband’s rage; this gives the reader no stable base from which to view Carma. The final point which turns Carma into a grotesque is the narrator’s informing the reader at the end that this woman’s story "as I have told it" (11) is a melodrama. The thing revealed in "Carma" is not Carma, but instead is the narrator’s distance from her, which in turn creates an unbridgeable gap between Carma and the reader.
Fernie May Rosen shares similarities with the other women in Part II of Cane, for hers is also a faraway and shadowy world, at least as it is presented by the narrator. The narrator in "Fern," however, differs distinctly from those in the previous sketches where the detached narrative tone served to alienate the reader from the story, thus turning the characters into unknowable grotesques. Here in "Fern," it is not a detached voice that comes between the reader and the character; rather, it is the narrator’s attempts to make his audience empathize with his obsession with the enigmatic Fern. The storyteller is obsessed with Fern, certainly, but his greater obsession is trying to compel the reader to agree with and understand his motives; he constantly attempts to draw the reader toward him with familiar phrases such as "as you know" (16) and "you will have observed" (16). As he pleads with his audience for fraternity ("your thoughts can help me, and I would like to know" [16]), the narrator pushes Fern further from the reader, for his emphasis is really on himself and not this young woman.

The narrator’s alienation from Fern comes through strongly in his inability to articulate exactly what it is he wants from her. He fantasizes about "something I would do for her...some fine, unnamed thing" (16-7), but "cannot get any further than this. Additionally, the judgments he makes about Fern are all too easy: "Fern’s eyes said to them [the men who offered her their bodies] that she was
easy" (14) and "something inside of her's got tired of them, I guess" (14). Subsequently, the reader is given a portrait of a solitary, confused woman, one which may or may not be accurate, for the narrator is just as alone and confused as is his presentation of Fern.

The two final sketches in the first sections of Cane each have narrators who are a bit closer to the lives of the two primary female characters (Esther and Louisa) than those from earlier stories. In reference to these last two tales, Susan L. Blake says of the narrator: "instead of simply relating what has happened to them [the women], he gets inside their thoughts and looks at the world from their point of view" (522). Through this less-detached narrative style the reader is finally able to glimpse a bit of the inner working of Cane's women. This technique of allowing the reader to see characters' thoughts helps to intensify the grotesqueness of these figures, for through their thoughts the reader is able to see how shocking and strange their worlds are.  

In "Esther," as in "Carma," Toomer shifts between realistic scenes which now include dialogue and dreamy paragraphs which mirror Esther's retreat into a world based on fantasies. The narrator informs us that, at the age of sixteen, "Esther begins to dream. The low evening sun sets the windows of McGregor's notions shop aflame. Esther makes believe that they really are aflame" (22). From this fire, Esther produces (in her mind) an infant that she
calls her own. Her retreat into a fantastic world where Barlo is her lover offers the reader a grotesque, disturbing portrait; here Toomer takes familiar concepts such as love, motherhood, and sex and shocks the reader through his portrayal of Esther "going over the edge" mentally. Her mind has become a "pink meshbag filled with baby toes" (24). The final lines of the story leave the reader with a haunting image of a zombie-like Esther who once and for all leaves the harshness of the real world for her frozen little private one:

She draws away, frozen. Like a somnambulist she wheels around and walks stiffly to the stairs. Ow! th'hm. "Jeers and hoots pelt her bluntly upon her back. She steps out. There is no air, no street, and the town has completely disappeared. (25)

In her article, "The Women in Cane," Patricia Watkins maintains that Esther is "absurdity in the face of reality" (263). Esther is absurd in her delusions, certainly, but not in a comic way like some of Cane's figures, such as Kabnis. Her absurd fantasies only become more chilling to the reader as Esther slips further and further into them.

As in "Esther," the narrator in "Blood-Burning Moon" either is aware of or invents the thoughts of the story's characters; through the telling of the thoughts of Louisa's two lovers (one white, one black), Toomer establishes the mysterious quality that Louisa, like Karintha, Fern, and Avey has about her that renders males helpless. Tom Burwell's mind goes blank as he approaches Louisa: "...he
wanted to say something to her, and then found that he didn't [sic] know what he had to say, or if he did, that he couldn't [sic] say it" (30). Similarly, the white Bob Stone has difficulty trying to identify the elusive quality about this black woman that attracts him so: "She was lovely in her way. Nigger way. What way was that? Damned if he know. Must know. He'd known her long enough to know. Was there something about niggers that you couldn't [sic] know?" (32).

The reader can see Louisa's indifference to the affections of the two men; however, this woman is not harsh or cruel to either of her rival suitors. While each man comes to visit, Louisa silently sits and gazes "vacantly at the rising moon" (28). Louisa's "dazed" and "hysterical" (33) response to Tom Burwell's slitting Bob Stone's throat in a fit of jealous rage seems human. However, "like Esther, Louisa withdraws to a world beyond the real, where she can no longer be wounded" (13) when Tom Burwell is burned alive for slitting the white man's throat. Her reaction to this is one of frozen oblivion as she sings to the full moon, wondering if "perhaps Tom Burwell would come" (35). This reaction from Louisa throws the reader off-balance, for one would expect an extremely strong, violent emotion from a woman who watched her lover burn. Toomer's ending to "Blood-Burning Moon" performs the task of the grotesque by shocking and thus alienating the reader
through Louisa’s reaction--or non-reaction--to Tom’s demise and her subsequent retreat into a silent world of her own.

The narrator in "Avey" (from Part II) is reminiscent of the one from "Fern," but to a more intrusive degree. Like many of the males in *Cane*, he longs to possess the intriguing female character and define her elusive quality; however, he concentrates more on his pursuit of her and less on the woman herself, thus once again leaving the reader mystified as to the real identity of the woman. In "Avey," the unnamed narrator's tone fluctuates from that of an awestruck youngster to a resentful young man who balances between anger and a confused attraction to Avey. His jealous emotions and attempts to control Avey block the reader's view of her. One comes nearest to knowing about Avey through the narrator's consistent remarks, which make it obvious that Avey is in control of the relationship, if it can be called that. For example, his helplessness is evident when, one night, Avey takes him in her arms: "I could feel by the touch that it wasn't [sic] a man-to-woman love. It made me restless. I felt chagrined. I didn't [sic] know what it was, but I did know that I couldn't [sic] handle it...helpless...I gave up at last" (43-4).

The narrator’s cynical comments such as "she didn't [sic] give a hang about them [her family]" (45) and "as time went on, her indifference to things began to pique me...downright laziness. Sloppy indolence" (45) force the reader to notice him instead of Avey. Even when the
narrator relates how he draws Avey to a secluded spot in his favorite park, where he goes when he wants "the simple beauty of another's soul" (45), he cannot help but dominate the story with himself: instead of quietly accepting the "simple beauty" of his companion, the narrator/would-be seducer rambles on egotistically ("I talked beautifully, I thought" [46]) about his goals, his ideas, and his opinions. When he realizes that Avey, indifferent as ever to him, has fallen asleep, he automatically reverts to his old bitter views about her.

This narrator's cold, egotistical narrative style turns Avey into a grotesque: her world seems to be one of callous indifference and mystery. On the other hand, he also shows a fascination with her. Unfortunately, the reader cannot get past the narrator's shifting tones or his self-absorption to get a close look at Avey.

A third important concept in the definition of the grotesque involves unresolved conflict, either of forces within a character or of external forces in which the character is hopelessly trapped. Sherwood Anderson's own definition of the word "grotesque" in the prologue to Winesburg, Ohio does not correspond exactly with this final major point in contemporary definitions of the grotesque. According to the old man in "The Book of the Grotesque," all the people with whom he was acquainted "snatched up one of the truths" and "the moment one of the people took one of the truths to himself, called it his truth, and tried to
live his life by it, he became a grotesque and the truth he embraced became a falsehood" (23-4). This concept of obsession with one thing—in this case, a truth—parallels the idea of constant attention being paid by the author and/or the character to one physical feature or trait that may identify a character as a grotesque. However, Anderson’s definition of the grotesque does not correspond with the actions of the figures he creates in *Winesburg, Ohio*; in these characters there is not so much an attempt to live by a truth as there is a desperate effort on the part of the townspeople to communicate with practically anyone. The truths to which Anderson refers in his prologue are not what distort the lives of his characters; instead, their inability to express and thus fulfill themselves make them grotesque.14

The Winesburgers’ collective problem concerning self-expression is an example of a grotesque unresolved conflict— to a point. This particular conflict differs from the standard version of the modern grotesque in an important way: modern critics have come to agree that the grotesque figure experiences an unresolved conflict that consists of two (or more) incompatible elements.15 The struggles that the Winesburgers face is one-sided; that is, their conflict or problem is simply that they are unable to communicate with the world. Anderson’s characters are better viewed as grotesques in terms of their physical
eccentricities and their alienation from the reader and from the others who inhabit their world.

The characters in *Cane* do indeed experience conflicts more complex than those experienced by the Winesburgers; furthermore, the conflicts are between incompatible elements. This point—that Toomer's characters are torn apart by not one but two opposing emotions or values—makes the figures from *Cane* extend further into the region of the grotesque than the characters from *Winesburg, Ohio*.

This last important grotesque concept of unrelenting disharmony can be found throughout *Cane*. The six stories of Part I deal primarily with male/female conflict, while the stories in Part II and "Kabnis" of Part III contain more complicated conflicts, most of which stem from clashes between Southern/rural values/black culture and Northern/urban values/white culture. The grotesque develops in response to periods of great social change, according to William Van O'Connor. The first several decades of the Twentieth Century in America were such a time, especially for blacks, many of whom chose to migrate to the larger cities in the North, such as Chicago and Washington, two cities mentioned in the middle section of *Cane*, in search of jobs. Once in the Northern cities, blacks experienced a very different atmosphere from the rural South they were used to; Toomer portrays the Northern cities as open to blacks but still dominated by whites. The characters in *Cane* who made this move experience
conflict, for their relaxed attitudes about things such as
sex and money do not correspond with the restrictive,
material values of the Northern cities.

In an unpublished autobiography, Jean Toomer writes
that as he watched the trend growing of blacks moving to
large cities, he "realized with deep regret that the
spirituals...would be certain to die out. The folk-spirit
was walking in to die on the modern desert...of industry
and commerce and machines."16 Certainly the stories from
Part II reflect this philosophy; characters consistently
battle with themselves over acting naturally and
instinctively, as they did in their former rural
surroundings, or keeping up with the social pretenses and
material goods that are so much a part of modern urban
life, reflecting the idea that "for the modern creator of
the grotesque, man is an inextricable tangle...of love and
hatred, self-improvement and self-destruction."17

Part II of Cane opens with the short "Seventh Street,"
which sets the tone for other pieces in this section: no
longer does the setting involve a winding, sun-dappled road
or a creaking wooden front porch. Instead, Toomer bombards
the reader with sights and sounds of the city: "Money
burns the pocket, pocket hurts,/Bootleggers in silken
shirts,/Ballooned, zooming Cadillacs,/Whizzing, whizzing
down the streetcar tracks" (39). Toomer then establishes
the marked contrast between the lives of the blacks and
whites who inhabit Washington. The black culture is
portrayed as free of restraint, full of uninhibited passion and life, evident in the forms of jazz music, dance, sex, and violence. This contrasts violently with the stagnant white culture of Washington. Although the blacks "thrust unconscious rhythms" (39) into the city—or rather into the whiteness of the city—Toomer's prediction that the black culture would stifle in the city is evident in "Seventh Street": the "wedges of nigger life" (39) "rust in soggy wood [the lifeless, mindless white urban society]" (39).

In "Rhobert," Toomer portrays a drowning-man/diver figure who has given up struggling against pressures of the city, such as financial obligations. Toomer follows images of Rhobert slowly drowning with these two unnerving sentences: "Soon people will be looking at him and calling him a strong man. No doubt he is for one who has had rickets" (40-1). These lines suggest that in the minds of some people, figures like Rhobert have risen above their poor backgrounds (symbolized by his rickety legs) and should be called courageous for taking on the responsibilities that life in the city demands. However, Rhobert is so far beaten down by these demands that he just "does not care" (40) any longer.

The last few lines in "Rhobert" bear the suggestion: "Let's [sic] call him great...let's [sic] build a monument and set it in the ooze where he goes down" (41). Toomer's ironic recommendation suggests two important things: first, that the act of taking on the material trappings
offered by the city should not be viewed as a heroic effort but rather as a foolish blunder; secondly, by erecting a mental statue to Robert not in some lauded public place but instead in "the ooze where he goes down" (41), others can remember his mistake and perhaps avoid a repetition of the same.

"Calling Jesus" also involves a figure, this time a young woman with a rural background, who has migrated from the South to a Northern city. While her name is never mentioned in the sketch, the story was first titled "Nora" when published in the Double Dealer in September of 1922. This work reveals conflict between the rural life/one's roots and urban life/rejection of one's past. Toomer likens Nora's soul to a "little thrust-tailed dog that follows her, whimpering" (55). When Nora returns home each night she leaves the dog/soul alone in the vestibule, where it spends the night "nosing the crack beneath the big storm door, filled with chills till morning" (55). This separation of woman and soul leaves her incomplete spiritually; however, since she now lives in the city, Nora chooses to disassociate herself from her soul, as there is no room for it in the city.

In discussing the fact that Nora lives in a large stone house in the North, a place where no pets are permitted inside, Udo O.H. Jung says that Nora "thus conforms to the etiquette of a well-to-do class of house owners, conforms to the values of a bourgeois society,
which insists on the separation [of Nora and her soul/past]."¹⁹ Nora gives up her spirituality in order to succeed in the city, but there are signs that the grotesque "struggle of opposites" is taking place within her; though Nora dutifully leaves her dog/soul in the vestibule every night, Toomer reveals that her dreams are not about her new life, but instead hearken back to images from her old environment. This woman "sleeps upon clean hay cut in her dreams...cradled in dream-fluted cane" (55). Furthermore, a mysterious someone carries the dog/soul inside to the sleeping young woman every night. The description of this event also emphasizes Nora’s rural past; it sounds almost like a whispered prayer or Negro spiritual from the South being hummed softly to the reader: "Someone...echo Jesus...soft as a cotton boll brushed against the milk-pod cheek of Christ...some one...echo Jesus...soft as the bare feet of Christ moving across bales of Southern cotton" (55). Whatever Nora may choose to do in the daylight in order to comply with the social codes of the city, her dreams reveal the grotesque struggle between her roots and her present urban life.

In his article "Jean Toomer: As Modern Man," Larry E. Thompson says that "Box Seat" shows "the essential goodness of man being buried by houses, machines, nightclubs...and anything else which represents modern society."²⁰ Mrs. Pribby, the cold landlady who has become a symbol of the city, certainly has no goodness or any other human traits
left in her; she long ago gave up struggling against the
dehumanizing effects of the city. Muriel, the young black
woman in the story, is in danger of turning into a Mrs.
Pribby, for she chooses to embrace the customs of urban
life that restrict her past but allow her at least to live
on the fringe of the city’s white society. Although Muriel
does choose to follow the accepted customs of the city,
for, in her words, she wants to "do something with
myself," (59) Toomer shows the discordant effect of her
actions. For example, when Muriel and a friend attend the
theater, Toomer notes that her natural Negro features
("purple planes...of her cheeks, purple...thick shocked
hair" [61]) go well with her orange dress, yet Muriel
covers it up, because the dress would clash with the
scarlet draperies of the theater. By doing this, she is,
in effect, covering up her own heritage in her effort to
silently assimilate into modern urban society. She will
soon become a cold, faceless being, just as Mrs. Pribby and
Rhobert have already done.

Muriel does at some points still struggle between
choosing to follow either her natural inclinations or the
restricted rules set by society. When she is with Dan
Moore, Muriel has to fight down her natural physical
attraction for him in favor of ignoring him, for he rejects
the mindless society that Muriel so desperately want to
assimilate into and thus is no longer valuable to her. Dan
understands this, and "reveals an essential part of modern
consciousness which makes ambiguity an essential part of modern existence" when he tells Muriel: "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" (59). Her mixture of natural instinct and adherence to modern customs is a reflection of this, the inability of the grotesque to successfully separate discordant elements, for, as Philip Thomson states, "the grotesque is a fundamentally ambivalent thing, a violent clash of opposites...an appropriate expression of the problematical nature of existence."22

The story "Theater" also involves two incompatible elements, this time a mind/body conflict. Early in "Theater," the narrative voice informs the reader that "John's body is separate from the thoughts that pack his mind" (50). John's problem is that he views the dancing girls in the theater and exhibits a physical yearning for them, yet he also idealizes these women at the same time. Whenever John begins to mythologize the young women ("Soon the audience will paint your dusk faces white and call you beautiful. O dance." [50]) his physical attraction to the dancers interrupts in the form of incomplete but obvious sexual longing: "Soon I...I'd like...I'd like to..." (50-1).

When John spies Dorris, he experiences an immediate pull toward this young woman with the purple stockings and the "crisp-curled hair" that frames her "lemon-colored
face" (51). However, he automatically begins to assign qualities to this woman he has not even met, as he thinks: "stage-door johnny; chorus girl...dictie, educated, stuck-up; show girl" (51). His physical interest in her leads John to create a complete fantasy image of Dorris, thus effectively aborting any hope for a relationship between the two; when Dorris completes her frenzied dancing and searches John's face for a flicker of interest, recognition--anything--she instead finds it "a dead thing in the shadow which is his dream" (53). John's inability to balance his physical and intellectual/fantastic side is evidence of the grotesque battle of his warring sides, which in the end alienate him from the very person with whom he is obsessed.

The final story in Part II, "Bona and Paul," contains characters who, like John from "Theater," have difficulty achieving a balance between fantasy and reality. Bona, a white girl from the South, tends to romanticize Paul ("He is a harvest moon. He is an autumn leaf. He is a nigger" [70]) whom she meets in Chicago. Paul, a young black man, also creates his own fantasy concerning their unstable relationship: when he and Bona slip out of the dance at Crimson Gardens, Paul, in an unrealistic but eloquent speech attempts to persuade the doorman--and himself--that they are not leaving the dance for the reason that countless other couples have--that his relationship with Bona is special and somehow above quick physical thrills:
I came back to 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 felt passion, contempt and 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. (78)

However, when Paul finally turns around to leave, Bona is gone, leaving Paul alone with his empty fantasy of their relationship.

The final story in Cane is really a culmination of the grotesque themes that Toomer uses throughout this collection of sketches and poems. In "Kabnis," Toomer uses the puppet or marionette motif, comic images, and, most fully, the conflict of opposite elements that turns Kabnis into an impotent, pathetic figure. Many of the tensions in "Kabnis" are the same ones that applied to the characters from the second section of Cane: they relate to the artificiality and stress of life for uprooted blacks who now live in Northern settings. On the surface the title character Ralph Kabnis appears to be a blend of both the North and the South: he received his education in the North, but has come back to rural Georgia to teach and to discover the roots of his black heritage. However, on
closer examination it becomes apparent that Kabnis is firmly entrenched in neither Northern nor Southern soil and their respective values. Instead, through his own actions and fears, Ralph Kabnis has placed himself in a kind of grotesque limbo where he is doomed to waste his life, torn by the contradictory yearnings within himself that prevent him from ever accomplishing anything.

This by-now-familiar grotesque concept of disharmony is made glaringly evident through Toomer's descriptions of Kabnis' world of indecision and discord. One night while gazing up at the sky, he entreats God: "Do not torture me with beauty. Take it away. Give me an ugly world...There is a radiant beauty in the night that touches and...tortures me...What's [sic] beauty anyway but ugliness if it hurts you" (83)? Even after ranting and raving about the negative qualities of both God and of Hanby, who is the school principal, Kabnis finds himself inadvertently praising the Lord. Kabnis' attempt to stifle these praises fails: "Oh, no, I won't [sic] let that emotion come up in me. Stay down. Stay down, I tell you. O Jesus, thou art beautiful..." (83).

This indecisiveness concerning practically everything he does reflects Kabnis' muddled efforts to realize and relate to his Southern roots. Bowie Duncan writes that Toomer portrays Kabnis as a "weak, idealistic teacher who can't cope with the South but who seeks roots in it."²³ Duncan continues with the idea that, even after his
encounters with Father John (the blind old man to whom Kabnis pours out his soul), Kabnis still cannot unify his various identities, which include his African, Southern, and Northern selves as well as his real and ideal identities.  

Kabnis' Northern self, which composes the rational, intellectual side of him, cannot cope with the elements that make up Southern life; even the chickens in the yard near his cabin alternately startle and annoy him, so much that he kills one of them. Similarly, Ralph's rational/Northern self is not comfortable in the Southern black spiritual tradition; Kabnis' excuse is that he simply cannot endure the shouting: "We dont [sic] have that sort of thing up North. We do, but, that is, some one should see to it that they are stopped or put out when they get so bad the preacher has to stop his sermon for them" (89). Even though this black man has returned to the South in search of his roots, he cannot accept or embrace what he finds. Ralph Kabnis spends much of his time fleeing his spiritual connections, both mentally and physically. Toomer uses the Negro spirituals that are sung in the rural Georgia churches not as soothing and reverent hymns, but as piercing and claustrophobic noises, always chasing Kabnis and trying to pull him in. As Kabnis listens in terror to the atrocities committed against a black woman by a group of whites, the tension builds as voices from the church service penetrate the house: "A shriek pierces the room. 
The bronze pieces on the mantel hum. The sister cries frantically: "Jesus, Jesus, I've found Jesus. O Lord, Glory t God, one mo sinner is acomin home." (90). Of course, in Kabnis' mind, this song is directed at him alone.

Ralph Kabnis lives in a claustrophobic world, much of it of his own making, for he cannot achieve a balance between the paralyzing fears and beliefs within himself or between conflicting outer conditions such as his position as a Northern-educated black in rural Georgia. These conflicting elements prevent Ralph from ever making a positive connection with his heritage in the South or even with himself. He is indeed a grotesque who will shuffle through life without any sort of fulfillment, alienated from everyone. In the introduction to Cane, Darwin T. Turner sums up Ralph Kabnis' bleak future by writing that Kabnis' decision to remain in the South and become a wagon-making apprentice for Fred Halsey will take him nowhere, for wagonmaking is "a trade dying in the new era of the automobile." 25

The figures in Cane and Winesburg, Ohio share the most common grotesque characteristic of having physical or psychic abnormalities. While characters from both works also exhibit the other two main characteristics of the grotesque, Jean Toomer's figures extend further into the realm of the grotesque than do Anderson's. For example, instead of "snatching up one truth" and thereby becoming
grotesques, as do Anderson's characters, the figures in *Cane* experience unrelenting conflict from two sides, thus making them the more complex grotesques. *Cane* 's figures are also far more inaccessible to the reader than are the Winesburgers, due to Toomer's skilled use of various narrative distancing techniques. Jean Toomer has left a collection of stories that should be remembered not only for their poetry-like prose, but for their examples of American grotesque figures.
Notes


2 Turner 457. Turner finds similarities in: both writers' emphasis on the theme that people need to learn to express passion (physical and otherwise); isolated settings that offer an atmosphere in which to "conjure Truth"; similarities of thought and character in Cane's narrator and Winesburg, Ohio's George Willard.


4 Thomson 13. These early uses of the term in the English language were directed toward antique paintings (e.g. works by Raphael).

5 Kayser 24-28.

6 Kayser 183. "Among the most persistent motifs of the grotesque we find human bodies reduced to puppets,
marionettes, and automata, and their faces frozen into masks."

7 Thomson 59.
8 Kayser 134.
9 Thomson 27.

11 Irving Howe, "'The Book of the Grotesque,'" The Achievement of Sherwood Anderson (Raleigh, NC: North Carolina State University Press, 1966) 95. Howe writes that the reason nothing ever "happens" in Winesburg, Ohio is that the grotesques have found a "dulling peace" in their conditions.

12 Thomson 58-59.

14 Malcolm Cowley, introduction to Winesburg, Ohio (New York: Penguin Books, 1985) 14. Cowley continues with the idea that inability for self-expression leads the Winesburgers to George Willard, whom they urge to "preserve and develop his gift."

University Press, 1962) 6. The grotesque develops in response to a turbulent age of change; O'Connor uses as examples the times of the Nineteenth Century evolutionary debates and also the age of the atomic bomb.

16 George C. Matthews, "Jean Toomer's Cane: The Artist and His World," CLA Journal 17 (1974): 344. In his unpublished "Outline of Autobiography," Toomer writes that he realized this when he (like Cabnis) was an assistant principal in Sparta, Georgia; he writes that "this was the feeling I put into Cane."

17 O'Connor 18.

18 Udo O.H. Jung, "'Nora' is 'Calling Jesus': A Nineteenth Century European Dilemma in Afro-American Garb," CLA Journal 21 (1979): 251-53. Toomer changed the title and withdrew Nora's name from the sketch in order to avoid comparisons with Nora Helmer from Ibsen's A Doll's House.

19 Jung 252.


22 Thomson 19.
23 Duncan 327. Duncan views Ralph Kabnis as perpetually unredeemed, even after "confessing" to Father John.

24 Duncan 327-29.

Annotated Bibliography


Blake, Susan L. "The Spectatorial Artist and the Structure of Cane." *CLA Journal* 17 (1974): 516-534. Blake discusses the narrative persona in *Cane* and how it progresses from a spectator (in Part I) to an artist (in "Kabnis"); she also maintains that the central conflict in *Cane* is this spectator/artist's struggle to involve himself in the stories.

Bone, Robert A. *The Negro Novel in America*. New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 1969. Bone devotes a small section to biographical information on Toomer; also he briefly discusses themes and symbolism in each of *Cane's* stories.


Clark, J. Michael cont.

reach; however, these men cannot obtain this experience because they use bodily contact (sex) as their only method of procurement.

Davis, Arthur P.  *From the Dark Tower: Afro-American Writers 1900-1960*. Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1974. This is a very good source of information on black American Writers, both major and minor. Toomer is classified as a "Planter" (of the seeds of the Negro Renaissance), even though he wrote only one novel and was a "Volunteer Negro" (could pass for white).

Duncan, Bowie. "Jean Toomer's *Cane*: A Modern Black Oracle." *CLA Journal*, 15 (1971): 323-332. Duncan likens *Cane* to a jazz composition, with one theme but many variations on it, constructed with no rigid progression. *Cane* is a composition "continuously in process" that needs to be read several times in order to be understood.

Hays, Peter L.  *The Limping Hero: Grotesques in Literature*. New York: New York University Press, 1971. Hays discusses literary characters who can be viewed as grotesques due to their being actually or figuratively lame or castrated.

Howe, Irving cont.
Press, 1966. pp. 90-101. Howe discusses possible literary influences on Anderson, writing that Winesburg, Ohio was one of Anderson's few memorable works, due to the "unity of feeling" in the overall collection of stories.

Jung, Udo O.H. "'Nora' is 'Calling Jesus': A Nineteenth-Century European Dilemma in Afro-American Garb." CLA Journal, 21 (1979): 251-5. Jung discusses possible reasons for Toomer's changing the name of the story (among them a comparison to Nora of Ibsen's A Doll's House); he also notes that the character's namelessness now lets her symbolize an entire group of people, both male and female.

Kayser, Wolfgang. The Grotesque in Art and Literature. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1963. This standard text discusses the evolution and current concept of the grotesque. Kayser makes numerous references in his book to grotesque examples from literature and paintings, primarily German and English works.

Matthews, George C. "Jean Toomer's Cane: The Artist and His World." CLA Journal, 17 (1974): 543-559. Matthews discusses the cyclical nature of themes and styles in Cane; he also examines the "economical prose style," that often turns out as ambiguous and mysterious instead of clear.

O'Neill, John, "Anderson Writ Large: 'Godliness' in Winesburg, Ohio." *Twentieth Century Literature* (1977): 66-83. O'Neill believes that this particular story "reveals in a more thorough and straightforward way the nature of the fanatical, the obsessive, and the lonely (67)." The characters in 'Godliness' are exaggerated versions of other Anderson types.


concept of American grotesque is twofold: 1) a grotesque version of Christianity, stemming from fanatic evangelists (as seen in Anderson’s works), and 2) the distortion of the community and individual, stemming from material greed.


Thurston, Jarvis. "Anderson and Winesburg: Mysticism and Craft." Accent 16 (1956): 107-128. Thurston sees Winesburg, Ohio as a mixture of Anderson’s mystical impulses and his practice of the formal demands of art. He also views Anderson’s idea of religion as a vague rejection of the material and a longing for brotherhood.

Toomer, Jean. Cane. New York: Boni and Liveright, 1923, 1975. Cane is a wonderfully lyrical collection of poems and sketches dealing with Southern women and
Northern/Southern conflicts; this is also good example of grotesque literature.

Turner, Darwin T. *In A Minor Chord: Three Afro-American Writers and Their Search for Identity*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1971. Turner devotes one-third of the book to Toomer; this includes a helpful biographical section, notes on the stories from *Cane*, and also glimpses of and commentary on Toomer's unpublished work.

Turner, Darwin T. "Intersection of Paths: Correspondence Between Jean Toomer and Sherwood Anderson." *CLA Journal* 17 (1974): 455-67. Turner discusses similarities between the two artists' writing and reproduces excerpts from an interesting series of correspondence between the two men, letters that show them giving each other praise and critical suggestions.

Watkins, Patricia. "Is There a Unifying Theme in *Cane*?" *CLA Journal* 15 (1972): 303-5. Watkins maintains that *Cane*’s theme is that man is a solitary creature, unable to commit himself to any one thing or build a relationship. He "ends as he began, alone and afraid" (303).