

ANALYSIS

Cane (1923)



Jean Toomer

(1894-1967)

“*Cane*, work by Jean Toomer, published in 1923, is a major work of the Harlem Renaissance. A brief book incorporating stories, poetry, and a play, the first third presents black people, mainly women, in the South in prose and verse sketches; the next group of tales deals with light-colored persons in the North, uncertain about themselves and their place in society; and the last third of the work contains one story, ‘Kabnis,’ about a black of that name from the North who goes to the South as a teacher, meets blacks of diverse views, and is frustrated in his search for a way of life.”

James D. Hart

The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 3rd edition
(Oxford 1941-83) 121

“Toomer’s first book, *Cane* (1923), a melange of poetry and prose, gave him an immediate reputation as a sensitive and gifted Negro writer. Probably indebted in style to Sherwood Anderson and Waldo Frank, *Cane* is exotic and lyrical. In a foreword to the book, Waldo Frank wrote: ‘For Toomer, the Southland is not a problem to be solved; it is a field of loveliness to be sung.’ Following *Cane* Toomer published *Babo*; *A One-Act Sketch of Negro Life* (1927); *Essentials* (1931), a collection of aphorisms; and *Portage Potential* (1932).”

Max J. Herzberg & staff

The Reader’s Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962) 1146

“The author who won the most admiration from Negro intellectuals in the twenties was probably the poet-novelist Jean Toomer.... Although it seems that nearly all of his friends were white intellectuals, Toomer was among the first believers in negritude—glorifying the presumed special qualities of African blood....and later joined the New York literary coterie of Kenneth Burke, Hart Crane, Gorham Munson, and Waldo Frank that championed the mystical teaching of Ouspensky’s *Tertium Organum*. Some time

around 1924, Toomer went to France, where he became a disciple of the Russian yoga mystic George Ivanovich Gurdjieff at his 'Institute' in Fontainebleau. When he returned, Toomer attempted to spread his new-found vision in Harlem and Greenwich Village. Then he seems to have vanished.

Cane, his major work, was little noticed when it was first published in 1923, although a number of avant-garde writers like Munson, Frank, and Sherwood Anderson lauded it. Toomer's subsequent published output is negligible.... He apparently wrote nothing after 1949 and is said finally to have denied that he was a Negro; as Ana Bontemps has put it, he 'faded into white obscurity.' In his autobiography, Langston Hughes wrote that Toomer had been married twice, each time to a white woman, and that he had refused James Weldon Johnson permission to publish his works in a Negro anthology.

Cane is very nearly impossible to describe. At first glance, it seems a hodgepodge of verse, songs, stories, and plays, yet there is a thematic unity celebrating the passions and instincts of black persons close to the soil as opposed to the corruption of their spirit and vitality in the cities. In idealizing the 'primitivism' and negritude of the Negro peasant, Toomer signaled the neoromantic attitudes of subsequent Negro authors in the twenties. Important too are Toomer's ambivalent attitudes about himself and his South. No Negro writer has written of the South with so much sense of pain and beauty inextricably linked. For Toomer periodically injects memories and images of the slave past into the very texture of his work, and also attempts, often successfully, to arouse in his reader unconscious longings for the mysterious lure of the Southern soil.

Is Toomer unconsciously saying that beauty resides in the pain and suffering of black men? Is the mother earth of Georgia to which he beckons his Negroes a death dream that brings ultimate release? Are the busy social and intellectual worlds of the city he portrays so enervating because they are so fulfilling, because the excite areas of consciousness that had better be left alone? Are passivity and withdrawal from modern life ultimate fulfillment? The paradox is inexplicable in rational terms, but Toomer patterned his life in similar paradoxes. In denying his Negroness in later years, Toomer may have achieved the self-obliteration he seems to have urged in *Cane*."

Edward Margolies

Native Sons: A Critical Study of Twentieth-Century Negro American Authors
(Lippincott 1969) 38-40

"For a time, the poet and novelist Jean Toomer was regarded as the most talented writer of the 'Harlem Renaissance,' a literary movement of black writers who had congregated in New York City in the early 1920s and had transformed Harlem into the intellectual and cultural center of black America. The group included an impressive number of painters, photographers, and musicians, as well as such writers as Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Zora Neale Hurston, and Claude McKay. In its magazines and anthologies, the movement promoted the creative work of the 'New Negro,' of whom Jean Toomer was thought to be one of the outstanding examples in literature.... The experimental nature of his work, and particularly his interest in combining dramatic and narrative sketches, drew praise from a wide range of writers, including Sherwood Anderson, Allen Tate, and Hart Crane....

In *Cane*, Toomer draws heavily on the folk songs, the folktales, and the syncopated rhythms of the language of the black people he encountered in Georgia. By mixing poems with both dramatic and prose sketches, he not only created one of the distinctive literary experiments of the 1920s but also fashioned a work of lasting historical and artistic significance. Historically, *Cane* played a major role in the efforts of black writers to enlarge the cultural life of black people in America. Artistically, it celebrates the power of exotic and primitive impulses to triumph over the tyranny of culture. What holds these two different aspects of Toomer's achievement together is his celebration of a freedom that is physical and psychic as well as aesthetic."

David Minter

The Harper American Literature 2
(Harper & Row 1987) 1281-82

“Whereas the best Harlem Renaissance figurations of the Black Christ tended to be occasional poems or, as in the case of some of the lyrics in Toomer’s *Cane*, subordinate elements of New Negro historical consciousness, those of Du Bois were messianic signs of his Pan-African interpretation of the diaspora.”

Eric J. Sundquist
To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature
(Harvard 1993) 596

Michael Hollister (2015)