

Early Twentieth-Century Fiction  
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Office hours: Monday 2 p.m., or by appointment

April 1, 2021. Toomer (2).

## review: positions in *Cane*, pt. I

- ▶ outsider
  - ▶ the narrator from up North
  - ▶ the desire for the unavailable woman
  - ▶ literary experiment/folk material
- ▶ insider
  - ▶ speaking for/from among black people
  - ▶ the fellowship of desire
- ▶ beyond categories
  - ▶ “it makes no difference”
  - ▶ hybrids, shades of color

## review: Toomer's positions

1894 b. Nathan Pinchback Toomer in DC

1914–17 attends six colleges/universities

1919–23 magazine publications (*NY Call*,  
*Crisis*, *Liberator*, little magazines)

1920 changes name: Jean Toomer

1921 Substitute principal, Sparta, GA:

Agricultural and Industrial Institute

1923 *Cane* published by Liveright

Small sales, critical success

1923– mystical/religious pursuits

(Gurdjieff, Jungian, Quakers...)

1925 *Cane* excerpts in Alain Locke, ed.,

*The New Negro* anthology (JT is not happy)

1967 d.



Passport, 1926. Beinecke.

The drama surrounding the publication of *Cane* is a unique and revealing instance of the problem that no person considered “Negro,” according to the one-drop-rule of the U.S. regime of race, could get a hearing *except* under the sign of blackness.

George Hutchinson, “Identity in Motion: Placing *Cane*,” in *Jean Toomer and the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. Geneviève Fabre and Michel Feith (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2001), 52.



The school in Sparta, Georgia. Jean Toomer Papers, [Beinecke library](#).

A visit to Georgia last fall was the starting point of almost everything of worth that I have done. I heard folk-songs come from the lips of Negro peasants. I saw the rich dusk beauty that I had heard many false accents about, and of which, till then, I was somewhat skeptical. And a deep part of my nature, a part that I had repressed, sprang suddenly to life and responded to them.

Letter to the *Liberator* (Claude McKay and Max Eastman), August 19, 1922, *Letters of Jean Toomer, 1919–1924*, ed. Mark Whalan (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2006), 70–71.

## black folk

Come, brother, come. Lets lift it;  
Come now, hewit! roll away!  
Shackles fall upon the Judgment Day  
But lets not wait for it. ("Cotton Song," 15)

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“I saw a man arise, an he was big an black an powerful—”

Some one yells, “Preach it, preacher, preach it!”

“—but his head was caught up in th clouds. An while he was agazin at the heavens, heart filled up with th Lord, some little white-ant biddies came an tied his feet to chains.” (“Esther,” 38)

## the uses of language varieties

The accepted grammar (and by this I mean the kind that is taught in schools) may be a means to this end. In which case, the artist uses it. On the other hand, the accepted grammatical construction may prove to be an obstacle. Whereupon, the artist shelves it. In this case, the only legitimate criticism of him would be in answer to the question, does the result justify his freedom?... Conrad and [Anatole] France are masters after their fashion. And so are James Joyce and Waldo Frank. Literature is large enough to contain the contrasts. Readers of literature?

Letter to Mary Burrill, n.d. [1922/1923], in Whalan, *Letters of Jean Toomer*, 109.

Wedges rust in soggy wood . . . Split it! In two! Again! Shred it! . . .  
the sun. Wedges are brilliant in the sun; ribbons of wet wood dry and  
blow away. Black reddish blood. Pouring for crude-boned soft-skinned  
life, who set you flowing? (“Seventh Street,” 71)

## Toomer's design

*Cane's* design is a circle. Aesthetically, from simple forms to complex ones, and back to simple forms. Regionally, from the South up into the North, and back into the South again. Or, from the North down into the South, and then a return North. From the point of view of the spiritual entity behind the work, the curve really starts with Bona and Paul (awakening), plunges into Kabnis, emerges in Karintha etc. swings upward into Theatre and Box Seat, and ends (pauses) in Harvest Song.

Whew!

Letter to Waldo Frank, December 12, 1922, in *Letters*, 101.

## discussion: linkages

- ▶ Find a few points of contact between different sections of *Cane*.
- ▶ How do these linkages make meaning? What kind of context is the book (the parts you've read) for each individual part?

Paul follows the sun, over the stock-yards where a fresh stench is just arising, across wheat lands that are still waving above their stubble, into the sun. Paul follows the sun to a pine-matted hillock in Georgia. He sees the slanting roofs of gray unpainted cabins tinted lavender. A Negress chants a lullaby beneath the mate-eyes of a southern planter. Her breasts are ample for the suckling of a song. She weans it, and sends it, curiously weaving, among lush melodies of cane and corn. Paul follows the sun into himself in Chicago. (“Bona and Paul,” 137–38)

## hopes (false and real)

Hanby: Professor Kabnis, to come straight to the point: the progress of the Negro race is jeopardized whenever the personal habits and examples set by its guides and mentors fall below the acknowledged and hard-won standard of its average member. (“Kabnis,” 185–86)

Kabnis, a promise of a soil-soaked beauty; uprooted, thinning out. Suspended a few feet above the soil whose touch would resurrect him. Arm's length removed from him whose will to help. . . ("Kabnis," 191)

## blockage

I started to hum a folk-tune. She slipped her hand in mine. Pillowed her head as best she could upon my arm. Kissed the hand that was holding and listened, or so I thought, to what I had to say. I traced my development from the early days up 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. How incapable Washington was of understanding that need.... I talked, beautifully I thought, about an art that would be born, an art that would open the way for women the likes of her. I asked her to hope, and build up an inner life against the coming of that day. I recited some of my own things to her.... Then I looked at Avey. Her heavy eyes were closed. ("Avey," 86–87)

## encounter

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 leers. 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.”

(“Bona and Paul,” 152)

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### Discussion

What is the significance of this encounter? Think about the context within the story and the book.

## the color purple

“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.” (153)

next

- ▶ Hurston, *Their Eyes*, at least to 99.
- ▶ Commonplacing, group A. Theme: Janie and a context (there are many).