

H-320

N-123

N-159

~~9-157~~

1985 10.3

325

FEB 04 1995

63-102

## ABSTRACT

### JEAN TOOMER: THE BURDEN OF IMPOTENT PAIN

By

Chris Antonides

To read a literary work solely on its own merits and in its own terms, without reference to an appropriate external context, can be misleading. But to read it in some apparently suitable context without careful consideration of its internal elements can be no less misleading. Since its publication in 1923, Jean Toomer's Cane has generally been accepted as an exemplar of the so-called Harlem Renaissance, a school of black scholars and artists attempting to regenerate racial pride through art. Though this interpretation of Cane had led to a certain agreement about the significance and meaning of the book, the book has generally been considered problematical. Yet, to date, no one has subjected the entire book to a close reading with respect to style, structure, and fiction. The present study aims to remedy that deficiency by subjecting it to a close reading placed in the context of Jean Toomer's biographical background and existing critical interpretations.

Beginning with the structure of the book, this study attempts to trace the unity of the poetry of the first and second parts, stylistically, metaphorically, and thematically. From this unity

emerges the persona of the poetry, a spokesman for Toomer himself. Using this persona as a source for the imagery, tone, and motifs developed in the prose, the three parts of Cane are subjected to systematic exegesis. In following this procedure, the study tries to be comprehensive, within reasonable limits, rather than selective.

What emerges from the cumulative weight of the exegesis is that Cane is far more congruent with Toomer's ambiguous attitudes toward race than has been formerly thought. Through an elaborate permutation and combination of significant imagery, tone, and motifs, Toomer's book does not simply affirm the theme of racial resurgence as posited in the Harlem Renaissance. Rather, it celebrates the Negro's past glories in a degenerating present, and affirms the absorption of the black race by the white. The entire book, then, becomes an elegiac celebration of a race that, from Toomer's point of view, has all but vanished as an ethnic entity.

JEAN TOOMER: THE BURDEN OF IMPOTENT PAIN

By

Chris Antonides

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to  
Michigan State University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of English

1975



© Copyright by  
CHRIS ANTONIDES

1975

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank all those who, through their many kindnesses, helped bring this project to completion. My special appreciation goes to Professors Sam Baskett and Russell B. Nye, whose patient encouragement sustained me in my purpose, and to Professor Barry Gross, whose practical and sensitive direction transformed it into reality.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. INTRODUCTION . . . . .	1
II. THE USES OF POETRY . . . . .	23
III. THE NARRATIVES OF PART I . . . . .	78
IV. THE NARRATIVES OF PART II . . . . .	142
V. "KABNIS" . . . . .	217
BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .	283

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Jean Toomer's Cane, which sold fewer than five hundred copies in 1923 and 1927, no longer languishes in ill-deserved obscurity. A steady trickle of articles, however, kept it alive as a minor masterpiece of black experience until the renewed interest in black culture, inspired by the civil rights movement of the 1950's and 1960's, created an atmosphere more receptive to the book's apparent stylistic anomalies. Of 158 reviews, articles, and dissertations,<sup>1</sup> significantly more than half have appeared since 1967, ironically, the year in which Cane's reappearance coincided with Toomer's death. The reprinting of Cane in a hardbound edition in 1967, followed by a paperback in 1969,<sup>2</sup> was due largely to the efforts of staunch champions: Arna Bontemps and George Gardiner, both associated with Fisk University which has done so much to further black learning in the United States, and Robert A. Bone, whose Negro Novel in America<sup>3</sup> placed Cane in the forefront of novels about black experience.

---

<sup>1</sup>John M. Reilly, "Jean Toomer: An Annotated Checklist of Criticism," Resources for American Literary Study, 4 (Spring 1974) 27-56. This checklist covers articles published through 1973.

<sup>2</sup>Jean Toomer, Cane (New York: University Place Press, 1967; rpt. Harper & Row, 1969). The paperback reprint replaces Waldo Frank's original introduction with a new one by Arna Bontemps.

<sup>3</sup>Robert A. Bone, The Negro Novel in America, rev. ed. (Princeton: University of Princeton Press, 1965).



Yet despite this renewed interest in, and the considerable study devoted to, Cane, the book remains in a different kind of obscurity. It has always been thought of as a puzzling book, difficult to classify, and hence to approach,<sup>4</sup> with its three sections comprising sketches, poetry, short stories, and even a play-like novella. Bone's classification to the contrary, attempts to read the work as a unified novel usually founder.<sup>5</sup> The tendency persists, however, because the novel seems to be the most significant genre to transmit cultural myths, and the pre-eminence of the novel form, generally, bestows an aura of importance.

However, positive evidence exists that neither the book's publisher, Horace B. Liveright, nor Toomer himself, had any illusions that Cane was a novel. After the book had been accepted by Boni and Liveright for publication in 1923, Liveright wrote to Toomer indicating quite plainly that he would have preferred a novel, and expressed

---

<sup>4</sup>A good survey of the criticism through 1966 appears in Peter G. Kousaleos' "A Study of the Language, Structure, and Symbolism In Jean Toomer's Cane and N. Scott Momaday's House Made of Dawn" (Ohio University, 1973), unpubl. diss., pp. 30-34. Almost any article published since 1966 refers to the "enigmatic" quality of the book. See, e.g., Mabel M. Dillard, "Jean Toomer: Herald of the Negro Renaissance" (Ohio University, 1967), p. 92; Todd Lieber, "Design and Movement in Cane," CLA Journal, 13 (September 1969) 35; Donald G. Ackley, "Theme and Vision in Jean Toomer's Cane," Studies in Black Literature, 1 (Winter 1970) 45-46; Rafael A. Cancel, "Male and Female Interrelationships in Toomer's Cane," Negro American Literature Forum, 5 (Spring 1971), 25; Catherine L. Innes, "The Unity of Jean Toomer's Cane," CLA Journal, 15 (March 1972) 306; Roberta Riley, "Search for Identity and Artistry," CLA Journal, 17 (June 1974) 480.

<sup>5</sup>See Bone, pp. 82-89. In a review of the Harper & Row reprint for the New York Times Book Review (January 19, 1969) 3, Bone refers to the book as a miscellany of stories, sketches, and poems.

hope that Toomer's second or third book would be one.<sup>6</sup> Yet during those early months of 1923, before Toomer's enthusiasm for writing about Negroes had begun to wane, the author wrote back to Liveright stating that his second book would in some ways be like his first, composed of several pieces; these would be three in number, rather than the rough dozen narratives of Cane, and two would "approximate Kabnis in length and scope," while a third would be a long story he had in mind.<sup>7</sup> Elsewhere, Toomer identifies these pieces as "Natalie Mann" and "Balo," both plays that he had tried unsuccessfully to interest contemporary theater troupes in, and "Withered Skin of Berries," a story written during the same period.<sup>8</sup> Whether these pieces were precisely what he had in mind in his letter to Liveright cannot be verified by anything more concrete at the time. That he felt himself unsure about writing a novel is revealed by his correspondence with Liveright:

I am not quite ready for a novel, but one is forming. As I vaguely glimpse and feel it, it seems tremendous: this whole black and brown world heaving upward against, here and there mixing in with the white. The mixture, however, is insufficient to absorb the heaving, hence it accelerates and fires it. This upward heaving is to be symbolic of the proletariat or world upheaval. And it is likewise to be symbolic of the subconscious penetration of the conscious mind.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup>Toomer Collection, Fisk University, March 12, 1923.

<sup>7</sup>Toomer Collection, Fisk University, March 9, 1923.

<sup>8</sup>Letter from Jean Toomer to Waldo Frank, Toomer Collection, Fisk University, undated, Box 3, File 7, item #825.

<sup>9</sup>Toomer Collection, Fisk University, March 9, 1923.

Not only does this passage reveal that Toomer felt that Cane was not a novel, and that even after its completion he still felt unready to write one, but it also shows that his thinking had not progressed very far beyond Cane--if indeed at all. His thumbnail sketch of the novel-to-be comes almost entirely out of Lewis' vision in "Kabnis,"<sup>10</sup> and that feeling of redundancy rather than development was later to assert itself in a sketch for his autobiography:

"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 forth [sic] book like "Cane," is one of the queer misunderstandings of my life.<sup>11</sup>

Apparently, the identification of the Negro with a black protagonist in his letter to Liveright had been carried as far as it could be to symbolize "the subconscious penetration of the conscious mind" which interested Toomer so much.

Why, then, was Cane not subtitled a collection of stories and poems, or a "vaudeville out of the South," as one of its contemporary advertisements put it?<sup>12</sup> The possibility exists that no one involved in producing the book thought that it would prove so baffling, and Toomer's own admission that Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio had been a revelation<sup>13</sup> and an influence may have led Toomer to

---

<sup>10</sup>Toomer, Cane, p. 212.

<sup>11</sup>Toomer Collection, Fisk University, Box 14, File 1, p. 59.

<sup>12</sup>Toomer Collection, Fisk University, Box 64, File 7.

<sup>13</sup>Toomer Collection, Fisk University, Box 1, File 1, item #43.



suppose that his own book would be received in the same frame of reference. He had his famous predecessor's own assurances that he had managed to capture the essence of the Negro in a way that Anderson admired and himself had hoped to do.<sup>14</sup> And there were superficial resemblances between Anderson's loosely structured, episodic "novel" and Toomer's Cane. Both tried to visualize the essence of people in a given region through sketches of individuals and through them to get at some deeper insight into the human condition. Moreover, each centered around a shadowy narrator moving among these individuals, observing and reporting what he saw.

But the narrator of Cane is far more shadowy than George Willard. The young man moving through Winesburg has both a name and an occupation, and however tenuous his relationship to the townspeople he writes about, their cumulative impact on him clearly forms the thematic progression of the book. The narrator of Cane, on the other hand, has neither name nor occupation, though he seems to be a wandering poet. Even so, he is never clearly in focus, fading and intensifying as a person almost inexplicably, a disconcerting factor in attempting to see in Cane a novel in spite of the author's own disclaimer. Lacking a more tangible central character, the book seems to be a series of disconnected fragments, idiosyncracies of Toomer, or stylistic experiments aimed at evoking the "soul" of the southern Negro.

---

<sup>14</sup>See the letter from Sherwood Anderson to Jean Toomer, Toomer Collection, Fisk University, Box 1, File 1.

Indeed, this consciousness-raising aspect of Cane seems to be very much at the center of what Toomer was trying to accomplish,<sup>15</sup> and the feeling of dissatisfaction that goes along with such an attempt was probably expressed in the "unfinished" quality of the narrator. Primarily, the narrator emerges as a poet and mystic searching for his ethnic roots as a means of symbolically resurrecting what he perceives to be the dying black ethos. He is, in fact, a spokesman for Toomer himself. That is clearly revealed in the poetry which forms the interludes between the narratives of Parts I and II. The dominant, urbanizing influence of white society underlies the poetic fragments, and an important part of the persona's ethnic odyssey is his belief that he has found a means of celebrating and thus preserving in "art" what is quintessentially black. Symbolically, this art regenerates the race through a miraculous rebirth of culture, even as the race itself is consumed by the urbanizing influence of the white presence. Such a gloomy prognosis for the black race, however, gradually leads the narrator to postulate a larger destiny for both black and white races than that implied by racial identity: that the loss of the black identity, though painful and sad, is only a first step toward a universal human identity. Thus the narrator successively wishes to withdraw into a dreamy, nostalgic reverie of racial memory, to move toward some higher realization of human identity, and to

---

<sup>15</sup>Toomer, autobiographical sketches. See Darwin Turner's illuminating discussion of the various versions of Toomer's autobiographies, In a Minor Chord: Three Afro-American Writers and Their Search for Identity (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1971), p. 122, 13n.

lament the passing of something beautiful and worth preserving even as his desire to preserve and communicate black experience fails to achieve its integrative and regenerative purpose.

But the portrayal of Negro "low life"<sup>16</sup> which fires the poet-philosopher's imagination quite overwhelms the narrator. His abortive messianic attempts at salvaging what he sees as a doomed black ethos have been subordinated by Harlem Renaissance advocates to what seems to be a celebration of black "primitivism."<sup>17</sup> Never a really cohesive movement, the Harlem Renaissance nevertheless had eloquent spokesmen with well-defined objectives. Essentially, these were to promote black achievement in the arts by providing opportunities for publication and performance. And the subject matter of these artistic expressions was drawn from what seemed then to be uniquely black: not the middle-class or intellectual adaptations of white culture, but the "low life" of the uneducated black whose imperfect acculturation made him seem more African.<sup>18</sup> Confronted with

---

<sup>16</sup>Nathan Huggins, The Harlem Renaissance (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 180. Huggins says that Toomer's mixture of literary naturalism and mysticism approximates "not the 'scientific' reportage of Zola, Norris, Dreiser, but, rather, the portrayal of human continuity with organic nature as in Turgenev." See also a note signed by Gorham Munson, Toomer Collection, Box 41, File 26: "Kabnis is an American equivalent to a Russian drama by Maxime Gorky or Anton Tchekhov. It ramifies deeply into the soil and into life and it reaches up to a stunted broken intellectualism."

<sup>17</sup>Huggins emphasizes the "low life" and "primitivism" in asserting that the Harlem Renaissance had greater links with Africa than the South, pp. 84-136. See esp. pp. 102 ff.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

the splendid sketches of Negro "primitives" in Cane, the Harlem proponents eagerly claimed Toomer as their own, predicting greatness for him.<sup>19</sup>

Unfortunately, they did not reckon with the narrator's ambivalent attitudes toward his racial identity. This ambivalence, in fact, reflected Toomer's own misgivings about his race. For a time, Toomer seemed to encourage the belief that he was Negro. This attitude coincided with the period during which he was publishing the individual sketches and poems later to be collected in Cane in various "little" magazines. A striking instance is in his letter to John McClure in response to the editor's request for background information:

Viewed from the world of race distinctions, I take the color of whatever group I at the time am sojourning in. As I become known, I shall doubtless be classed as a Negro. I shall neither fight nor resent it. There will be more truth than they know in what they say, for my writing takes much of its worth from that source.<sup>20</sup>

Aside from the opportunistic tone of this passage, Toomer clearly acknowledges his Negro ancestry. But he also sets the stage for his subsequent denial:

---

<sup>19</sup>Arna Bontemps, "The Negro Renaissance: Jean Toomer and the Harlem Writers of the 1920's," in Anger and Beyond, ed. Herbert Hill (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), pp. 20-36.

<sup>20</sup>Cited by Darwin Turner, pp. 30-31. Turner also cites a passage in Toomer's Autobiography that clarifies the commercial value of the Negro associations, p. 61.

As near as I can tell, there are seven race bloods within this body of mine. French, Dutch, Welsh, Negro, German, Jewish, and Indian. . . . One half of my family is definitely white, the other, definitely colored.<sup>21</sup>

Given such a varied background, the classification of Toomer as a Negro does seem to be a matter of choice. What is important here is that he willingly takes on the label at a time when he wishes to make commercial use of it, an impression that is reinforced by his correspondence with Sherwood Anderson.<sup>22</sup>

In September of 1922, McClure had shown Anderson the manuscript for "Nora," later to be included in Cane under the title, "Calling Jesus." So impressed was Anderson, that he wrote to Toomer, congratulating him:

I read your Nora in September Double Dealer and liked it more than I can say. It strikes a note I have long been wanting to hear come from one of your race.<sup>23</sup>

Anderson simply assumes that Toomer is a Negro, an impression probably strengthened by John McClure.<sup>24</sup> In his reply to Anderson, and in the

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>22</sup>Toomer does not correct Anderson's assumption that he is a Negro. See letters of the years 1922-24, Toomer Collection, Fisk University, Box 1, File 1, items #42-52.

<sup>23</sup>Toomer Collection, Fisk University, Box 1, File 1, #42. New York, 1922? No exact date.

<sup>24</sup>Anderson reveals McClure's correspondence discussing Toomer and his work, sent with a letter dated March 3, 1924, to Jean Toomer. Toomer Collection, Fisk University, Box 1, File 1, item #54. McClure has already indicated in a letter to Toomer that he believes the latter to be a Negro, June 30, 1922. And Toomer has warily confirmed the fact, see above, pp. 1-6/7, and 20n.



letters written to him during the next two years, Toomer never once offers to correct this assumption.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, he seems to sustain it as a means of maintaining the older man's interest, discussing the matter of race quite freely. That would seem in keeping with his statement to McClure that he "would neither fight nor resent" the classification. Yet to Waldo Frank, who had befriended and encouraged him, Toomer complained that Anderson was mistaken in limiting him to his Negro part.<sup>26</sup> This criticism of mistaking the part (Negro) for the whole (complex human) appears in the penultimate poem of Cane, "Prayer."

At about the same time, Toomer responded to an inquiry from Claude A. Barnett of the Associated Negro Press, affirming his classification as Negro. This letter written in April 1923, several months before the publication of Cane, attributes his black ancestry to P.B.S. Pinchback, his maternal grandfather, and explicitly links his heritage with his literary output:

The true and complete answer is one of some complexity, and for this reason perhaps it will not be seen and accepted until after I am dead. . . . The answer involves a realistic and accurate knowledge of racial mixture, of nationality as formed by the interaction of tradition, culture, and environment, of the artistic nature in its relation to the racial or social group, etc. All of which of course is too heavy and thick to

---

<sup>25</sup>See 22n above.

<sup>26</sup>Toomer Collection, Fisk University, Box 3, File 7, item #829 (?).

go into now. Let me state then, simply, that I am the grandson of P B S Pinchback. From this fact it is clear that your contention is sustained. I have "peeped behind the veil." And my deepest impulse to literature (on the side of material) is the direct result of what I saw. In so far as the old folk-songs, syncopated rhythms, the rich sweet taste of dark skinned life, in so far as these are Negro, I am, body and soul, Negroid. My style, my esthetic, is nothing more nor less than my attempt to fashion my substance into works of art.<sup>27</sup>

This apparently frank avowal of racial heritage nevertheless contains the same avenue of potential denial as that in Toomer's letter to McClure the preceding summer. That is, in stressing the complexity of his origins and in withholding a part, Toomer makes his racial affiliation a matter of conscious choice. His identification as a Negro is almost an exercise in aesthetics: he has looked beneath the surface of Negro life and, to the extent that he had identified with ethnic aspects of that life, becomes a part of it. He nowhere declares that he is simply a Negro. And eventually, he will deny that his grandfather Pinchback is a Negro, eradicating the last connection with the race.

But for the time, it suited Toomer to involve himself with his Negro identity. And there is no need to doubt the sincerity of that involvement. When Toomer closes his letter to Barnett with a direct reference to his need for money and the hope that the Associated Negro Press might be willing to pay for his material, he does no more than any serious writer:

---

<sup>27</sup>April 4, 1923, Toomer Collection, Fisk University, Box 1, File 3, item #69.



Next week I start a short story and complete a criticism of a Study of Waldo Frank. But there is no reason in the world why I cant [sic] manage to get some stuff to you, if, somehow or other, big or little, you can pay me. You, together with most of the magazines I send ms to, are in a comparatively lean and difficult field. I realize that, and hence dont [sic] expect much from you. But some small dribs must come in, else I close shop.<sup>28</sup>

Such a passage might reinforce Robert A. Bone's contention that Toomer stopped writing about Negroes because Cane was an economic failure.<sup>29</sup>

The reference to closing up shop may well indicate how much Toomer hoped that the book would save him from his financial difficulties. That his hopes may have been a bit unrealistic is suggested in a query to Liveright about movie rights.<sup>30</sup> That he planned to go on writing about Negroes, however, has already been shown in his letter to Liveright, in which he proposed a second, and even a third, book.

Perhaps Toomer was given to short-lived enthusiasms. Cane was the product of a brief visit to Sparta, Georgia in the fall of 1921.<sup>31</sup> The proposed second book was also drawn largely from that trip and the period immediately following Toomer's return to Washington, D.C.<sup>32</sup> When Waldo Frank suggested that he and Toomer visit the South,

---

<sup>28</sup>Ibid.

<sup>29</sup>Bone, p. 89.

<sup>30</sup>January 11, 1923, Toomer Collection, Fisk University, Box 1, File 5, item #154.

<sup>31</sup>Autobiography, Toomer Collection, Fisk University, Box 14, File 1, p. 58.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., p. 59.

in the summer of 1922, Toomer agreed, confiding to Frank that the inspiration of Sparta, Georgia had just about spent itself.<sup>33</sup> Toomer needed fresh contact with his subject, for excepting brief visits, he did not consciously live as a black man despite his conscious association with blacks. His subsequent visits to black communities, however, failed to provide an impetus equal to the first, and by the middle of 1923, that was going stale. When, in August of that year, Horace Liveright wrote to Toomer suggesting that, for promotional purposes, he give greater emphasis to his "colored blood," Toomer sharply rebutted. In a rather offended tone, he replied that his racial composition and position in the world were realities which he alone might determine, that he would accept publicity created by Boni and Liveright regarding his Negro identity, but was not to be expected to feature this claim on his own behalf.<sup>34</sup>

Perhaps the sharpness of Toomer's rebuttal may seem to be an outright denial of his race, and therefore a sudden reversal of his earlier attitudes. Actually, such is not the case, for Toomer plainly says that Boni and Liveright can advertise him as a Negro if they wish. He merely demands that they respect his right of self-determination. That had been Toomer's position all along. But the tartness of his response does seem at odds with his previous equanimity.

---

<sup>33</sup>July 25, 1922, Toomer Collection, Fisk University, Box 3, File 12, #794.

<sup>34</sup>September 5, 1923, Toomer Collection, Fisk University, Box 1, File 5, item #176.

The suddenness of this apparent reversal may be due simply to the gaps between the letters. What Toomer thought and felt about racial matters from day to day has not been recorded. But his impatience with Anderson, and even with Waldo Frank's introduction to Cane, with their thinking him a Negro gives ample evidence that his rebuttal to Liveright was part of a progressive state of mind.

Toomer's attitudes about race are inextricable from his attitudes about his larger human identity. From the time he composed Cane until well after he renounced his black heritage, Toomer was obsessed with molding his own identity. He repeatedly attempted to shape the events of his life in autobiographies, leaving behind numerous fragments, outlines, drafts, at least three complete versions, and revisions.<sup>35</sup> In them, he treated the details of his life as if they were the plastic materials of art, to be stretched and altered for aesthetic effect. With other sources to verify some of these details, only inconsistencies among the various pieces themselves and his letters show that the artist's mind has transformed events.

But out of this aesthetic tampering, a fascinating picture of self-determination emerges. Toomer was born in Washington, D.C. late in 1894; the accepted date is December 26, though there seems to be some doubt about that.<sup>36</sup> His mother, Nina Elizabeth Pinchback, had

---

<sup>35</sup>Turner, p. 122, 13n.

<sup>36</sup>The exact date of Toomer's birth is apparently unknown. In her biographical notes added to the chronology for the Toomer Collection, Mrs. Marjorie Content Toomer lists December 26, 1894. But another note indicates that he was born in October.

married Nathan Toomer over the strenuous objections of her father, P.B.S. Pinchback, the retired Negro politician from Louisiana. Nathan Toomer had represented himself as a well-to-do plantation owner from Georgia, according to one account. Whether because his daughter's husband had misrepresented his wealth, was more than twice her age, or simply was a ne'er-do-well, Nina Elizabeth was not happy in her marriage. In 1895, Toomer deserted his wife and infant son.

Nathan Eugene Toomer--"Jean" was one of his later transformations--remembers a bitter and lonely childhood.<sup>37</sup> The reproaches of Grandfather Pinchback apparently hastened the daughter's departure from the Pinchback ménage. But the effect of those reproaches must have been gradual, for Mrs. Toomer did not leave immediately after her husband's desertion. She divorced him in 1899, but did not move to New York with her son until 1905. She remarried shortly afterwards; very little is known about the man, Coombs. The young Toomer, then called Eugene Pinchback, perhaps in an effort by Pinchback to remove the association with his natural father, regarded his stepfather with some hostility. He nurtured a romantic longing for the father he had never really known. Upon his mother's death of complications following an appendectomy, in 1909, he returned to Washington to live with his grandparents. The return cannot have been a welcome one for Toomer: a deep sense of loss for father and mother, a stepfather from whom he felt alienated, and a grandfather whom he resented

---

<sup>37</sup>Autobiography, Box 14, File 1. See also Turner, p. 12.

as having caused the rift in his family would have combined to create an identity crisis in anyone. In Toomer, they set in motion the motivation for his ultimate denial of race.

During the period of Toomer's unhappy childhood, Pinchback's fortunes declined. When Toomer returned to Washington, he found himself living on Florida Avenue, in an upper-class Negro neighborhood. There, Toomer got his first glimpse into "the sweet taste of dark skinned life":

With this world--an aristocracy such as never existed before and perhaps will never exist again in America--midway between the white and Negro worlds. For the first time I lived in a colored world.<sup>38</sup>

With autobiographical hindsight, he makes much of the initiation. But whatever he came to believe later, the environment cannot have given him a real sense of belonging. He saw himself as a "ruffian," troubled by the fear that excessive sexuality was weakening him, uncertain whether to identify with blacks or whites, and perhaps morbidly introspective.<sup>39</sup>

Had he had a stronger sense of attachment to his grandfather, the choice might not have been so difficult for him. P.B.S. Pinchback was known as a Negro. Though Toomer later maintained that his grandfather had claimed Negro ancestry merely as a political expedient during Reconstruction,<sup>40</sup> the history of that supposed

---

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>39</sup>Autobiography, Toomer Collection, Fisk University, Box 14, File 1, pp. 10-11.

<sup>40</sup>Cited by Turner, p. 33.

fabrication is so elaborate as to challenge credibility. It requires us to believe that Pinchback had calculated this expedient long before Reconstruction, at least from the time he raised a company of colored volunteers in 1862, a "Corps d'Afrique," as he called them, when he was twenty-five years old.<sup>41</sup> His resigning his commission after difficulties over his race--commissioned officers were white--does nothing to strengthen Toomer's assertion. And in 1863, Pinchback was allowed to raise a company of colored cavalry, a recognition of the man's determination and ability.

These character traits are thoroughly manifested in Pinchback's pursuit of political power. During Reconstruction, he proved as vigorous and able to organize an electorate as he had been to organize a militia. In 1868, he was elected to the Louisiana state Senate, and in December, 1871 was elected president pro tempore. When the incumbent lieutenant-governor died, Pinchback inherited that position. He served as acting governor from December 1872 to January 1873 during the impeachment proceedings against Henry Clay Warmoth. Though Pinchback was twice declared elected to seats in the national legislature, he was never seated because the elections were contested. When he retired to Washington, D.C., in 1890, he enjoyed a privileged status because of his attainments. It was only after the political temper had begun to shift, when Pinchback's friends and colleagues in

---

<sup>41</sup>DAB, ed. Dumas Malone (New York: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1934), p. 611.

the legislature were no longer present, that his circumstances became straitened. That he turned, in such circumstances, to Negroes is most significant. Labeled as a Negro and lacking influential allies, Pinchback perhaps no longer had a choice.

An incident recounted by George H. Devol in his memoirs, Forty Years a Gambler on the Mississippi,<sup>42</sup> provides colorful insight into Pinchback's childhood. He tells of a cabin boy named Pinch whom he had trained to play cards with Negro passengers on the steamboats. After a particularly successful night, when Devol and his associates, including Pinch, had "cleaned out" the passengers, the gambling team took discrete leave of the boat in a heavy fog. The men and the boy were obliged to carry their valises of gambling equipment through the mud, sliding and falling as they went. Pinch was moved to declare that he would find a better way to exist, and vowed that he would get into the legislature some day. Devol makes clear that the Pinch of his story is the same Pinchback who was elected senator. Though Devol's anecdote may well be apocryphal, Pinchback was indeed a cabin boy on the Mississippi when he was eleven years old. If Devol may be believed, Pinchback was known as a Negro then. And in 1887, Pinchback was still prominent enough to have successfully rebutted the story. The story does not prove Pinchback's Negro identity, but adds another element to an extraordinary fabrication as promulgated by Toomer.

---

<sup>42</sup>Cited by Arna Bontemps, "The Negro Renaissance," pp. 33-34.

Such was the awesome figure Toomer went to live with in 1909, grew to resent, to defy, and, finally, to deny. Following the inner turmoil of his high school years, Toomer was unprepared for a career. He spent the period from 1914 to 1920 floundering from one abortive program to another: agriculture, medicine, socialism, physical education, commerce; Madison, Chicago, Boston, New York, Washington. Neither subject nor place could hold him. He would venture into some new enthusiasm only to return to his grandfather, whose patience had run out. When Toomer began to show interest in a writing career in late 1919 and early 1920, Pinchback encouraged him.<sup>43</sup> This period was one of discovery for him. He immersed himself in Walt Whitman, discovered Goethe, Romain Rolland, and others, and, through the Rand School, began to move among the literary figures of New York. Striking up an acquaintance with Helena DeKay, following her lecture on Jean Christophe, Toomer went with her to a party attended by E. A. Robinson, Witter Bynner, and Scofield Thayer. Toomer apparently met Waldo Frank at this gathering, but he says that he formed no clear impression of the man at the time, and that it was only after a chance meeting with Frank in Central Park that their friendship developed.

Significantly, Toomer calls his autobiographical description of the period from 1920 to 1923 "The Book of Death and Birth."<sup>44</sup> It was the period during which he launched his most concentrated effort at a career. What died and what was born? His grandfather died in

---

<sup>43</sup>Autobiography, Toomer Collection, Fisk University, Box 14, File 1, pp. 39-40.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., pp. 49-64.



December of 1921. Though Toomer had read extensively and diversely from the time of his meeting with Frank in the spring of 1920, he had still not produced anything of literary significance. And though his interest in writing seemed more sustained than his previous interests, his pattern of running back to Washington whenever he had over-extended himself in running away did not change. When his grandfather became ill in the fall of 1921, Toomer was offered a temporary job as acting principal of an industrial and agricultural school for Negroes in Sparta, Georgia. Feeling enervated and trapped by his grandfather's imminent death, he welcomed the escape to Georgia. And it was there that Toomer formed the images that he would pour into Cane. He stayed three months, and when he returned to Washington in November, Pinchback's death was a month away. While reminiscing on this important period in his life, Toomer says that he "realized with deep regret, that the spirituals, meeting ridicule, would be certain to die out. With Negroes also the trend was towards the small town and then towards 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."<sup>45</sup> This feeling, associated as it is with his grandfather's death and a sense of guilt, was implanted in Cane. Toomer says, further, that Pinchback died the day after he had completed "Kabnis," which Toomer called "the long semi-dramatic closing-piece of 'Cane.'"<sup>46</sup>

---

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., pp. 58-59.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., p. 59.

Nor was the death of Pinchback and its concomitant, the Negro, the only death of the period. During the feverish creation of Cane in 1922, Toomer exhausted not only himself but his faith in literature as a force which could provide men and women with "a constructive whole way of living."<sup>47</sup> He saw the men and women of art and literature as "lopsided specialists of one kind or another; or, they were almost hopelessly entangled in emotional snarls and conflicts." Probably, Toomer's meeting with Waldo Frank's wife, Margaret Naumburg, helped to crystallize this idea.<sup>48</sup> But she can have been influential only after the enormous impact of the South and Pinchback's death on Toomer. The timing of Toomer's turning away from his Negro identity, the "swan-song" for the Negro which he expressed in Cane, suggests that he was ready for some new experience. His affair with Margaret Naumburg must surely have been one of those "emotional snarls and conflicts" which advanced him further into philosophical "vision" as an escape. He was primed for Gurdjieffian mysticism,<sup>49</sup> and, providentially, Gurdjieff appeared on the scene almost at the same time Cane was published. And from then on, Toomer was finished as a literary artist. He continued to try his hand at literature of

---

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>48</sup>Earth-Being, one of Toomer's autobiographical pieces, Toomer Collection, Fisk University, Box 19, File 4, p. 6.

<sup>49</sup>Autobiography, p. 64.

a more "universal" character, wrote numerous philosophical and social tracts, in addition to his autobiographies. But he never again wrote with the vividness and incisiveness of Cane.

Thus Toomer became absorbed in a mystical birth and lost his way as a Negro. That his imaginative reconstructions of his life show him to be too absorbed in his own psyche to perceive that the racial question was far from resolved, and that there was still quite a lot left to be said, can only reinforce the regret already expressed by those who wish to enhance black accomplishment. Given the strong sense of identification between Toomer's search for his true nature and his literary efforts, we can expect to find his counterpart in Cane. A thorough explication of the book in the light of the details of his experience should show the importance of the book's elusive narrator in establishing the literary equivalent of Toomer's renunciation of racial identity.

## CHAPTER II

### THE USES OF POETRY

The tendency of critics to read Cane as a novel has led them either to neglect the poetry or to subordinate it to the prose.<sup>1</sup> When critics do comment on a poem, it is usually to crystallize some metaphoric or thematic element. For example, because "Song of the Son" seems to celebrate black identity, critics have singled it out for considerable attention.<sup>2</sup> Centrally located in the first part of the book, this poem sharply focuses on the narrator's desire to locate his ethnic roots among the southern blacks. But the emphasis thus given to the theme of racial affirmation obscures both the structural function of the poetry and the development of the narrator's consciousness embedded in it.

---

<sup>1</sup>As recently as June, 1974, Louise Blackwell tries to make a case for Cane as an experimental novel. See "Jean Toomer's Cane and Biblical Myth," CLA Journal, 17 (June 1974) 535-42. See also Darwin Turner's discussion on the futility of such an attempt, In a Minor Chord: Three Afro-American Writers and Their Search for Identity (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1971), p. 124, 23n.

<sup>2</sup>Mabel M. Dillard, "Jean Toomer: Herald of the Negro Renaissance" (Ohio University, 1967), unpubl. diss. Dillard was among the first to do so. See also Todd Lieber, "Design and Movement in Cane," CLA Journal, 13 (September 1969) 35-50, Donald G. Ackley, "Theme and Vision in Jean Toomer's Cane," Studies in Black Literature, 1 (Winter 1970) 45-65, and Roberta Riley, "Search for Identity and Artistry," CLA Journal, 17 (June 1974) 482.

Precisely because Cane is so infused with poetic elements of a personal, subjective nature, those parts of the book that are clearly set up as integral poems afford a point of departure for examining Toomer's method.<sup>3</sup> After a short, epigraphic poem on the title page, Toomer uses five pairs of poems to separate each of the six prose pieces in Part I. He varies this pattern in Part II, beginning with a pair of very short sketches best described as prose-poems, and thereafter alternates the prose pieces with combinations of poems or prose-poems in pairs. He omits this structural device entirely from the third and last section of the book. In addition, Toomer uses very short, epigraphic poems and other lyric pieces scattered throughout the three sections of the book. As these contribute very little to the thematic and structural unity of the poetic intervals between the prose pieces, they will be discussed with the stories and sketches which incorporate them.

The epigraphic poem on the title page is so miniscule that it often escapes notice:

Oracular.  
Redolent of fermenting syrup,  
Purple of the dusk,  
Deep-rooted cane.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup>Bernard Bell, "A Key to the Poems in Cane." CLA Journal, 14 (March 1971) 251-58, attempts to show a religious unity among the poems.

<sup>4</sup>Jean Toomer, Cane (New York: University Place Press, 1967; rpt. Harper & Row, 1969), iii, title page. All further references to this work will appear in the text.

Yet its placement and deceptively simple content make it a crucial poem, establishing the central metaphor around which Toomer unifies the imagery of his book. He chooses cane, its faintly purple hue suggestive of dusk, to represent his vision of the black people. The fragrance of cane syrup and the sensuousness of the color purple easily suggest both "the sweet taste of dark skinned life" and the "aristocracy" of the "colored world" which Toomer first found in Washington, D.C.<sup>5</sup> But cane clearly does not conjure up the Washington milieu; the deep roots of the last line point to the soil of the Negro's ancestors in the South. And the first word, "oracular," hints that, as an emblem, cane is mysterious, puzzling, and prophetic, thus introducing an element of ambiguity into the image. This uncertainty juxtaposed with the image of dusk tends to reinforce that element, though the culmination in "deep-rooted cane" offsets it to some extent. The sense of stability and affirmation of the rural experience suggested by the deep roots, lends a certain weight to the image coming, as it does, at the end.<sup>6</sup>

Thematically, the poems of Part I elaborate on these ambiguous elements. The narrator seems to move among the groups and individuals in rural Georgia, observing, becoming progressively involved with them, recording and reacting to their experiences. The first

---

<sup>5</sup>April 4, 1923, Toomer Collection, Fisk University, Box 1, File 3, item #69.

<sup>6</sup>Toomer commented on his having sent roots into southern soil on his visit to Georgia. See the letter to Sherwood Anderson, December 18, 1922, Box 1, File 1, item #43.

of the ten poetic interludes between the major prose pieces breaks with the free form of the epigraph. It is made up of eight lines set in iambic pentameter couplets. The speaker of the poem observes "black reapers" as they sharpen their scythes preparatory to cutting their way through the fields. Their actions are deliberate, ordinary, and the rasping sibilants of the first four lines onomatopoetically evoke the acts of sharpening and cutting in a matter-of-fact way:

Black reapers with the sound of steel on stones  
Are sharpening scythes. I see them place the hones  
In their hip-pockets as a thing that's done,  
And start their silent swinging, one by one (6).

The speaker is apparently observing at some distance: the reapers are not differentiated, their gestures are stylized, dominated by group movement. The effect is almost ritualistic.

But the next four lines develop parallel ideas in a way that throws the entire poem into new perspective:

Black horses drive a mower through the weeds,  
And there, a field rat, startled, squealing bleeds,  
His belly close to ground. I see the blade,  
Blood-stained, continue cutting weeds and shade (6).

The black figures in the first lines may seem to be simply Negroes working their way through the fields. But the parallel with the black horses, the indifference and relentlessness built into the entire image, creates grim associations. The black figures become faintly ambiguous, the shift from human effort to the harnessed effort of animals suggesting a first step in the development of

mechanization.<sup>7</sup> The ruthlessness of the horse-drawn mower contrasts with the uneventful actions of the humans in the first part: the black figures there do not encounter a field animal with their scythes, but the parallel structure of the poem suggests that, if they had encountered one, it would all be "as a thing that's done," unfeeling, inevitable. If Toomer intends to associate mechanical gestures with the encroachment of civilization, the bleeding rat becomes a metaphor perhaps of the natural black man. The Negro then becomes either the dumb instrument of his own undoing, or the victim of a blind force.<sup>8</sup>

But the neutrality of the speaker gives no clue, and Toomer's own statements about the encroachment of civilization on the rural way of life are only distantly hinted at.<sup>9</sup> The speaker merely observes the squealing, bleeding rat without emotion, without reaction. In "November Cotton Flower," which immediately follows "Reapers," the

---

<sup>7</sup>In his Autobiography, p. 59, Toomer expresses concern that "with the Negroes . . . the trend was towards the small town and then towards the city--and industry and commerce and machines," Toomer Collection, Fisk University, Box 14, File 1. Michael Jay Krasny, "Jean Toomer and the Quest for Consciousness" (University of Wisconsin, 1972), unpubl. diss., sees this conflict between the country and the machine as central to the first part of Cane, p. 62. Lieber traces this conflict back to Toomer's association with Hart Crane, p. 36. Bell also hints at this idea in his analysis of "Beehive," p. 257.

<sup>8</sup>Bell, p. 253. He sees "Reaper" as a cyclical rhythm of Nature, an "emblematic representation of death as a timeless source of tension in life." William C. Fischer, "The Aggregate Man in Jean Toomer's Cane," Studies in the Novel, 3 (Summer 1971) 203, sees the rat image as a prelude to the killing of Bob Stone in "Blood-Burning Moon."

<sup>9</sup>Krasny, p. 62.



speaker preserves this psychological distance. The poem loosely follows the Italian sonnet form in that it consists of fourteen lines of iambic pentameter couplets grouped in the octet and sestet pattern. This grouping is achieved only by the meaning of the lines rather than the rhyme scheme, and the iambic rhythm is broken in lines 11 and 12, in which Toomer rhymes "saw" and "before":

Boll-weevil's coming, and the winter's cold,  
 Made cotton-stalks look rusty, seasons old,  
 And cotton, scarce as any southern snow,  
 Was vanishing; the branch, so pinched and slow,  
 Failed in its function as the autumn rake;  
 Drouth fighting soil had caused the soil to take  
 All water from the streams; dead birds were found  
 In wells a hundred feet below the ground--  
 Such was the season when the flower bloomed.  
 Old folks were startled, and it soon assumed  
 Significance. Superstition saw  
 Something it had never seen before:  
 Brown eyes that loved without a trace of fear,  
 Beauty so sudden for that time of year (7).

The setting of this poem, like that of "Reapers," in the fields amid the "natural" life of the rural primitive, creates a similar kind of circumstantial irony. Where the ironic contrast between humans and horses contributes to a relentless, unfeeling atmosphere, that in "Cotton Flower" reverses the startling effect of the bleeding rat with an equally startling effusion of mystical beauty.

The octet pictures a bleak and dismal scene. Instead of the deceptively uneventful movements of the reapers, the landscape seems animated by a sinister nature. The boll weevil has come and gone, and, together with the approaching cold weather of the fall, has ravaged the cotton stalks. Their ancient appearance is intensified in the metaphoric comparison with snow. Curiously, the vanishing

white cotton suggests the melting of snow in spring. But it is a strange, inverted spring. The "snow" leaves the earth parched and dry, instead of providing life-giving moisture. The earth sucks the streams dry and drains the wells. The image of birds lying dead a hundred feet below ground creates a portentous atmosphere. The incongruous image of the "pinched and slow" branch which "Failed in its function as the autumn rake" mystifies. For the function of the rake is to catch at debris; perhaps here what Toomer means is that the plants may catch water and hold it in the soil. The whole of these eight lines presents at once a harsh winter and an anti-spring.

Yet out of this false spring a flower blooms. The sestet carefully prepared a personification of the "cotton flower" as an allusion to Karintha, the half-wild creature of the sketch preceding this poem.<sup>10</sup> Here are the "Brown eyes that loved without a trace of fear,/ Beauty so sudden for that time of year." But the significance here lies in the revelation to the speaker. The juxtaposition of this poem with the "Reapers" brings into relation the unfeeling harvest and the sudden effusion of feeling. And this contrast strikingly recalls Toomer's autobiographical statement in "The Book of Death and Birth," about the period in which these poems were written.<sup>11</sup> He

---

<sup>10</sup>Lieber, p. 39, associates the cotton flower with Karintha, as does Bowie Duncan, "Jean Toomer's Cane: A Modern Black Oracle," CLA Journal, 15 (March 1972) 325.

<sup>11</sup>Autobiography, pp. 58-59.

clearly associates the death of the "folk-spirit" of the Negro with the death of his grandfather. Significantly, he returned to Washington from Georgia in November, the month of the startling cotton flower. This is not to say that Toomer consciously transformed the "November Cotton Flower" into a metaphor of his grandfather's death. Given Toomer's propensity for retrospection, he may well have associated the idea with the event at a later date. But the insight is a useful one in that it suggests a deeper meaning to the poem than the association with Karantha.

Structurally, too, the placement of the poem suggests that Toomer is building a larger meaning. "November Cotton Flower" follows "Reapers," and that tends to loosen its tie with the preceding sketch and strengthen its link with its companion poem. Both poems share the element of startling revelation, and, though the speaker's participation in that revelation still seems vicarious, there is a deepening of feeling in the second poem.

"Face" and "Cotton Song," which follow the narrative "Becky," show the further development of Toomer's design.<sup>12</sup> "Face" goes beyond "November Cotton Flower" in delineating a black woman's features in terms of rural imagery. "Cotton Song" returns to the

---

<sup>12</sup>Krasny, p. 63, sees "Face" as a "starkly imagistic word painting of a suffering woman . . . near death. But Bell, 254, sees "Face" and "Cotton Song" as extending the religious symbolism of "Becky," in which the first poem signifies the suffering and sacrifice of Christ as embodied in Negro experience, and the second poem makes a complementary reference to the resurrection, a subtle analogue to the rolling away of the stone from the sepulcher.

work fields of "Reapers," but moderates the apparently unfeeling atmosphere by recreating a Negro work song. The speaker decreases the distance between himself and his subject, giving an aura of deepening involvement.

Perhaps the most striking initial difference in "Face" is its break with the metrical regularities of the earlier poems:

Hair--  
 silver gray,  
 like streams of stars,  
 Brows--  
 recurved canoes  
 quivered by the ripples blown by pain,  
 Her eyes--  
 mist of tears  
 condensing on the flesh below  
 And her channeled muscles  
 are cluster grapes of sorrow  
 purple in the evening sun  
 nearly ripe for worms (14).

This free and deceptively simple enumeration of an old woman's features gives each a metaphoric value, balancing the sublime against the earth-bound and the moribund. Until the last three lines, the images are unified by references to water, the substance lacking in "November Cotton Flower." "Streams of stars" seem to play on the word "streams" in such a way as to start the flow of images downward to the expected ground: the hair as topmost part of the woman's head also connotes the sky from which the water falls; then the inverted "canoes" afloat on a brow rippled by a wind of pain suggests an upside-down lake from which rise the mists of eyes; these, "condensing" on the cheeks below, flow into the "channels" worn into the woman's facial muscles.

But the downward flow is interrupted at the cheeks as the speaker unexpectedly compares them to bunches of grapes. As in the epigraph of the title-page, Toomer links the purple of a growing plant with evening. But instead of the deep roots of cane, he completes the downward movement with the imminent fall of "grapes . . . nearly ripe for worms." The interruption provides an ironic twist at a crucial moment, for if the purple of the grapes metaphorically becomes the "purple of the dusk" of the epigraph, then "Face" creates another instance in which dusk signifies the black experience. The poem's earlier lines do not adequately prepare for the sudden appearance of the image, but its parallelism with the epigraph strongly suggests thematic significance.

As its title immediately suggests, "Cotton Song" renders the common work experience of blacks, that of the backbreaking toil of the field hands accompanied by songs to ease monotony and fatigue, and to help coordinate movement.<sup>13</sup> The song also functions to relieve the pathetic atmosphere of "Face" with good-natured irony. Surprisingly, though the lines rhyme, they are metrically and rhythmically uneven:

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

This first of the five stanzas shows the irregularities of line and meter. By ignoring the conventional metrical foot, one can read most

---

<sup>13</sup>Bell, 254.

of the lines in a chanting way with four stressed syllables on a line. But such a procedure results in unexpected shifts and, in the fourth line, a very unnatural reading of the words. The pattern is otherwise consistent and appropriate to a work song. The words fall into the uneven patterns of men straining at heavy work.

The halting, straining rhythms of the first stanza, together with its urgency to act at once, to lift and heave, and not to wait "upon the Judgment Day," prepare for the easy, rolling sounds of the second:

God's body's got a soul,  
Bodies like to roll the soul,  
Cant blame God if we dont roll,  
Come, brother, roll, roll! (15)

The suggestion here that, once the straining has overcome the initial inertia of the burden, the momentum will carry the workers forward more easily, complements the meaning of the words. The hope of Judgment Day, when the shackles of a dreary life will fall away, is an inducement: bondage followed by freedom. The play of sound and meaning even becomes a kind of ironic jesting. The rolling "o's" have an onomatapoetic quality in "God's body's got a soul,/Bodies like to roll the soul," producing that mixture of wry humor, pain, and music that are characteristic of work songs. The underlying serious spiritual element turns into the earthbound quality of play-in-work.

Building on the playful satire of "Bodies like to roll the soul," the third stanza reveals more clearly what kind of bodies roll what kind of souls:

Cotton bales are the fleecy way  
 Weary sinner's bare feet trod,  
 Softly, softly to the throne of God,  
 "We aint agwine t wait until th Judgment Day! (15)

The play on bodies rolling the soul extends the actions of the first and second stanzas into a metaphoric connection with the cotton bales. Figuratively, the activity becomes the way the workers guide their souls to God. But the imagery of black bodies rolling fleecy, white souls marks an important reference to the white-inculcated religion. The allusion is without any bitterness, here, and foreshadows further development in "Georgia Dusk" and "Conversion." The image, perhaps symbol, of the white man's oppression of the black, cotton, is turned into a fleecy path for weary people. In a different context, the final line, "We aint agwine t wait until th Judgment Day," might well hint at a threat.

But the fourth stanza makes clear that the black's determination to act before Judgment Day refers to making cotton roll:

Nassur; nassur,  
 Hump.  
 Eoho, eoho, roll away!  
 "We aint agwine t wait until th Judgment Day!" (15)

Whatever dreams of escape Judgment Day harbors remain dreams. The complete break with the preceding stanzas dramatizes that the rhythmic straining has reached its greatest pitch in the first two lines. The emphasis given to this stanza as a result makes it the climax of the song. This emphasis is made stronger in that the entire stanza is enclosed by the quotation marks introduced at the end of the third stanza. The fourth stanza thus becomes a kind of expansion of the

last line of the third stanza and lends great weight to the repetition of that line. And the fifth stanza simply repeats the second stanza as a refrain-like close to the song.

Thus "Face" and "Cotton Song" add implied dimensions to the narrator of Cane. In the first poem, he goes quite far in responding to the pathos of the old woman, almost as far as sentimentality. In the second, he gets close enough to field workers to try to catch the inflections of the voices and movements. He expands the imagery introduced at the beginning of the book and reveals patterns of contrasts in his responses to the southern milieu. He has set the stage, so to speak, but up to this point, has not walked out onto it.

Nor does this elusive speaker ever visibly walk out onto his landscape. But in the first of the two poems at the center of Part I, he refers directly to himself in the first person, and to his commitment to the black people and the soil from which they sprang. The implied conflict in the ambiguous portrayals of the earlier poems and in the fluctuating distance between the speaker and his subject is brought a little more clearly into focus in "Song of the Son." The poem's five stanzas, moving from invocation through affirmation, reveal strong misgivings about the future of the "soul" of the black race. The opening lines of the first stanza contain an invocation whose object is not clarified until the second stanza:

Pour O pour that parting soul in song,  
O pour it in the sawdust glow of night,  
Into the velvet pine-smoke air to-night,  
And let the valley carry it along,  
And let the valley carry it along (21).





The "parting soul," like the presence invoked, is not immediately apparent. But its transitoriness is conveyed, and associated with the "sawdust glow" and "velvet pine-smoke" atmosphere of the night. This image strengthens the allusion to the epigraph on the title page, redoubling the links between darkness, sensuousness and the implied black people. Metaphorically, these sensory impressions become a kind of river of emotion pouring out of the atmosphere and flowing down the valley.

When the speaker apostrophizes the soil directly, he identifies both the "parting of soul" and himself as deriving from it:

O land and soil, red soil and sweet-gum tree,  
 So scant of grass, so profligate of pines,  
 Now just before an epoch's sun declines  
 Thy son, in time, I have returned to thee,  
 Thy son, I have in time returned to thee (21).

Here is the speaker's homeland, raw and primitive. The sweet-gum tree and the abundant pine imply woodlands, the natural wealth of the land whose exploitation is hinted at in the "sawdust glow." Through the implied process of trees reduced to heaps of sawdust, the image subtly links with the encroaching mechanization and commercialism which Toomer suggests in "Reapers." But if the glow and the smoke connote the emerging struggle between the simpler agrarian way of life--with its closeness to the soil hinted at in the poems leading up to this one--and the mechanized urban way, that conflict is submerged in the sensuous and elegiac elements which dominate the ambience of this poem. Reinforcing the departing way of life in the first stanza, the reference

to an imminent decline of an epoch strengthens the note of sadness. But the sadness is partly offset by the moment of realization, and the speaker declares himself a son of southern soil. The refrain, repeating the last line in each stanza, makes a particularly subtle close: by setting the phrase "in time" in apposition to "Thy son," the speaker plays upon meaning. He is a son of the southern soil at a crucial moment in black development, but, just as significantly, he is a son of an epoch in decline. Thus, the oracular image of dusk and redolence is transposed from fermenting cane syrup to smoldering sawdust.

The theme of an epoch's decline hinted at in the sawdust glow, is picked up again in the next stanza:

In time, for though the sun is setting on  
A song-lit race of slaves, it has not set;  
Though late, O soil, it is not too late yet  
To catch thy plaintive soul, leaving, soon gone,  
Leaving, to catch thy plaintive soul soon gone (21).

The speaker voices his affirmation in a context of gathering dusk. The sun is in decline, and the metaphoric play on "song-lit race" clearly identifies the black people with dusk. The repetition of the phrase "in time" emphasizes the decisiveness of the moment for the speaker: he will capture the soul of his southern soil, and so perpetuate a beautiful thing about to die. This idea is introduced in the title of the poem in that the "Song of the Son" becomes the song derived from the soil, and the association of "song-lit" with sun invites a play on the words "son"/"sun." The concentration of "song," "sun," "son," and dusk establish twilight as a crucial metaphor of black experience.

Intensifying and multiplying the images of dusk and purple begun in the "oracular" epigraph and threaded through the earlier poems, the fourth stanza adds:

O Negro slaves, dark purple ripened plums,  
Squeezed, and bursting in the pine-wood air,  
Passing, before they stripped the old tree bare  
One plum was saved for me, one seed becomes (21)

Here, the color purple explicitly connotes the black race, especially those members from the past era of slavery. The purple cane, the purple "cluster grapes of sorrow," and now the "dark purple ripened plums," all delineated at dusk, are now fused into a metaphor of exploitation. The Negro slaves and their remnants are ripe for plucking, "Squeezed, and bursting in the pinewood air." There is also a submerged allusion to "Face," whose "cluster grapes of sorrow/ purple in the evening sun/ nearly ripe for worms" connote death. Again, the reference to "Passing" ties up the associations of "parting," "declines," and "Leaving" in the earlier stanzas, and stresses the elegiac tone of this poem. Finally, the fruit despoiled, the tree itself is now about to be "stripped bare," while in the background of the previous stanzas the scrap heaps of forest smolder. This stark image of exploitation foreshadows the tragic condition of the black race.

Unlike the first three stanzas, the fourth stanza omits the repetition of the last line in order to prepare for its continuation into the fifth stanza: the line breaks off, "One plum was saved for me, one seed becomes," and leads without pause into the next stanza,

"An everlasting song." The effect created contrasts with the reiterations of the first three stanzas:

An everlasting song, a singing tree,  
 Caroling softly souls of slavery,  
 What they were, and what they are to me,  
 Caroling softly souls of slavery (21).

The seed, a commonplace of the theme of renewal, becomes the means of perpetuating the vanishing black race. But the renewal will not take place literally. Rather, the soul of that race is to be preserved in song: the tree that grows from that seed will sing and celebrate what the Negro slaves were and what they are to the speaker. The reference to slavery identifies what the speaker considers most significant about the black race, the traditions of a bygone way of life. The entire weight of the song associations is thus invested in the "souls of slavery" caroled by that tree. A germ of folk art will perpetuate a vanishing race, an idea strongly emphasized by the repetition of the second and fourth lines.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup>See Dillard, pp. 38-39; Krasny, p. 63. Lieber also makes this statement about "Song of the Son," pp. 37-38. Reilly, 314, sees redemption for the black poet in this poem; Ackley, 47-48, essentially agrees with Lieber; Sister Mary Kathryn Grant, "Images of Celebration in *Cane*," *Negro American Literature Forum*, 5 (Spring 1971) 32, sees the "Song of the Son" as a prevalent motif of celebration; Catherine L. Innes, "The Unity of Jean Toomer's *Cane*," *CLA Journal*, 15 (March 1972) 320, also agrees with Lieber, especially that the racial heritage is almost lost; and Charles W. Scruggs, "The Mark of Cain and the Redemption of Art: A Study in Theme and Structure of Jean Toomer's *Cane*," *American Literature*, 44 (May 1972) 285, sees the persona as the "son of the fallen Adam, the one the 'Bible lied about,'" an allusion to "Kublis." The idea, most strongly voiced by Lieber, that the poem is acceptance of lost heritage poured into art, runs through most of the commentaries.

Perhaps the most prominent feature of Toomer's poetic style up to this point is its reliance on the poignantly ironic metaphor. The sharp reversals of "Reapers," "November Cotton Flower," and "Face," are especially noteworthy. The mixture of spirituality, pathos, and whimsy in "Cotton Song" effectively captures folk elements in a consciously artistic manner. But in "Song of the Son," as the narrator affirms his experience, the ambiance softens and the sensuousness deepens. The backbreaking toil of "Reapers" and "Cotton Song," and the prodigies of "Cotton Flower" and "Face," are replaced with celebration.<sup>15</sup> Toomer has also contrasted landscapes with individuals, arranging these in each of the preceding pairs of poems.

The softer ambiance and the pairing of individual with landscape continues in the relationship between "Song of the Son" and "Georgia Dusk." The "sawdust glow" of the former poem blooms into a warm, glinting scene:

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 (22).

These opening lines sustain the mood of dusk as a developing metaphor for the black's heritage. The self-consciously "poetic" diction in

---

<sup>15</sup>George C. Matthews, "Toomer's Cane: The Artist and His World," CLA Journal, 17 (June 1974) 547, juxtaposes the "blood-hot eyes" with the "fagots" of "Portrait in Georgia." Bell, 255, emphasizes the word "genius" in his interpretation, perhaps hinting at Lewis' visions in "Kabnis." Grant, 33, merely comments about the poem's celebration. Fischer, 203, curiously, finds the tone of the poem sardonic. Innes, 309, sees racial fusion in the images, a most important clue to understanding Cane.

such words as "disdain" and "indolence" reveal the presence of the speaker of "Song of the Son," but now withdrawn into the background once again. The educated usage in the context of the "tournament for flashing gold" contrasts with the Negro stereotype of indolence. The conflict between light and dark, with its heavily symbolic overtones of race and exploitation, passively resolves in the dusk. The sky is personified as being more interested in feasting than in competing for possession of the sun. The day connotes the period of oppressive labor established in "Reapers" and "Cotton Song," and here the dusk becomes the period of release.

The speaker's tendency to withdraw, especially after his expressed kinship with the blacks in "Song of the Son," becomes an important thematic concern in the second stanza:

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-songs from soul sounds (22).

In the preceding poem, the speaker rejoiced that he had arrived in his spiritual homeland in time to save the last remnant of the old slave culture. But he is clearly not this "genius of the South/ With blood-hot eyes and cane-lipped scented mouth" who creates folk art from the raw materials of black experience. The speaker's role, then, becomes one of observing and recording. His vision of the "genius of the South" goes beyond the earlier associations of black sensuousness and the imagery of dusk, and assumes mythic qualities. The context makes him sound almost supernatural, a woodland spirit, a personification of brute passions and charmed breath.

But instead of the appearance of the hypothetical "genius," the two following stanzas shift the speaker's perspective to an object whose presence, till now, has only been hinted at in the "sawdust glow":

The sawmill blows its whistle, buzz-saws stop,  
And silence breaks the bud of knoll and hill,  
Soft settling pollen where plowed lands fulfill  
Their early promise of a bumper crop.

Smoke from the pyramidal sawdust pile  
Curls up, blue ghosts of trees, tarrying low  
Where only chips and stumps are left to show  
The solid proof of former domicile (22).

The sawmill becomes a tangible element of encroaching civilization. This pair of quatrains contrasts the influence of industry with that of the agrarian way of life in the opening pair. The silence which follows the sawmill's shutting down for the day metaphorically releases the spell that bound the landscape to dormancy during the day. Now the "winter" of day is followed by the "spring" of dusk, and a mystical pollen fertilizes the ground ready to receive it. The whole is an allegory in miniature, preparing the celebration of night and freedom which are to come. But the image is not wholly free from the pollution of the industrial presence. The smoldering sawdust pile, first introduced in "Karintha" as an image of destruction, sends up low-hanging clouds of smoke to haunt the scene where the trees were reduced to fragments. The imagery recalls the "parting soul" of the soil carried along by the "velvet pine-smoke air," the "sawdust glow," and the ruthless stripping of the plum tree in "Song of the Son."

Since the poetic images progressively associate the rural countryside with the "soul," the identity, of what is black, the



fragmentation of those metaphors of black identity connote the fragmentation of the identity. The haunted atmosphere in "Georgia Dusk" combines with the sensuousness of the scene to create a richly ironic celebration. This mingling of fragments of an old way of life with a new continues in the fifth stanza:

Meanwhile, the men, with vestiges of pomp,  
 Race memories of king and caravan,  
 High-priests, an ostrich, and a ju-ju man,  
 Go singing through the footpaths of the swamp (23).

These men of African ancestry, already fragmented by their adaptation to a new land, still dimly recall their past. Their behavior affirms that past and celebrates it, even as the sawmill fragments it. The images of "pomp" only hint at the past in a sketchy way, little flashes of the barbaric splendor captured impressionistically in the highly connotative words, "king and caravan,/ High-priests, an ostrich, and a ju-ju man."

The tribal nature of these vestiges culminates in the last two stanzas:

Their voices rise . . the pine trees are guitars,  
 Strumming, pine-needles fall like sheets of rain . .  
 Their voices rise . . the chorus of the cane  
 Is caroling a vesper to the stars . . (23)

O singers, resinous and soft your songs  
 Above the sacred whisper of the pines,  
 Give virgin lips to cornfield concubines,  
 Bring dreams of Christ to dusky cane-lipped throngs.

Once again, the metaphors multiply the associations between black people and elements of the natural countryside. To the accompaniment of the guitar-like strumming of the falling pine needles, the chorus of black singers is identified with sounds of the canefield. The added

comparison of the falling needles to rain renews the associations of the scene with spring. And in the final stanza, the people's voices, permeated by the atmosphere of the resinous pines and the incense-like fragrance of the smoldering sawdust, rise up gently "Above the sacred whisper of the pines." The fragments of a dimly recalled, barbaric past combine with sensuous men in a sensuous landscape to produce a religious ecstasy. The ethereal voices give to the "cornfield concubines" an aura of innocence, hence the "virgin lips." And the "dreams of Christ" ironically refers to the influence of the white man's religion on people who might otherwise generate a "genius of the South/With blood-hot eyes and cane-lipped scented mouth." The folk song, working in these fragmented, transformed people, has become a carol. The resulting hybrid is full of sensuous beauty, and though the speaker has remained carefully in the background, his deep involvement with the people is evident in the rapturous language he employs.

The shift away from the "genius of the South" at the beginning of "Georgia Dusk" to the "dreams of Christ" at its end dramatically highlights the speaker's quest for a spiritual leader of the black people. In "Song of the Son," the speaker evidently seeks and finds an identity in the soil of his ancestors. But the song he finds emanates from the soil; he does not sing it, though he invokes it. In "Georgia Dusk," he looks around, so to speak, for a minstrel who can capture the spirit of the land in individual song. But though the scene the speaker beholds is "A feast" worthy of such a being, he finds instead

a people collectively celebrating the spell of night. Their dreams are of Christ, and the messianic implication correlates the sense of struggle with the yearning for release which has been interwoven into the earlier poems.

Thus, in these two poems, Toomer reaches the structural and thematic mid-point of Part I.<sup>16</sup> Each pair of poems leading up to and including this central pair regularly alternates a shorter followed by a longer poem, and each pair grows progressively longer: the first pair consists of eight and fourteen lines, respectively; the second, of thirteen and twenty lines; and the third, of twenty and twenty-eight lines. The effect is distinctly step-like, though by no means rigid. The impression of length, felt, yet partly concealed by the relationship of the poems to the stories and sketches, is paralleled by a corresponding intensification of the human fractions that add up to Toomer's projection of the black ethos and the speaker's search for it. The framing of the two "faces," with their plant-imagery in "Face" and "November Cotton Flower," by the field scenes in "Reapers" and "Cotton Song," restates the theme of the title page epigraph: black identity is rooted in the soil of its slavery, and dusk is an important part of the metaphor. At the same time, images of fragmentation are introduced: the squealing, bleeding rat, the

---

<sup>16</sup> Interpretations vary somewhat, but most critics agree that either "Song of the Son" or "Georgia Dusk" are central to the first part of Cane.

unseasonable blooming of the cotton flower, the face "nearly ripe for worms," the shackles, the smoldering sawdust, the stripped plum tree, and, finally, the chips and stumps of trees. Yet all of these are infused with affirmation. The mingling of cultural elements represented through these images inspires the speaker.

Immediately following this structural and thematic climax, Toomer sharply compresses the remaining two pairs of poems of Part I. The pattern logically reverses the rising effect in the first two pairs, though "Nullo" and "Evening Song" repeat the short-long relationship of the pairings with seven and twelve lines, respectively. But "Conversion" and "Portrait in Georgia," which close the pairings of Part I, reverse the relationship with eight and five lines, respectively. The effect of these relationships creates a slight structural rise in "Evening Song" followed by a falling away in the final two poems. This pattern is thematic as well.

"Nullo"<sup>17</sup> begins with a deeper penetration into the virgin forest. As with "Georgia Dusk," the poem begins at dusk:

A spray of pine-needles,  
Dipped in western horizon gold,  
Fell onto a path.  
Dry moulds of cow-hoofs.  
In the forest.  
Rabbits knew not of their falling,  
Nor did the forest catch aflame (34).

But there is no focus on human activity. In fact, this poem is the only one in the first part of Cane that makes no direct reference to

---

<sup>17</sup>A neglected poem. Bell, 256, comments on its "aura of wonder and mystery" in ordinary phenomena. Krasny relates it to Karintha's childbirth, p. 64.

human beings. The golden sun of "Georgia Dusk" still lingers on the horizon. Here, however, no feasting men nor baying hounds disturb the absolute silence of the forest. The "spray of pine-needles" reminds us of the resiny "rain" accompanying the chorus in the sixth stanza of the preceding poem. The reference to the path is ambiguous, for the speaker does not clearly identify it as human or animal. The presence of the prints of cattle without attending human prints seems to establish the path as animal. And this impression is further heightened by the nature of the poem. The whole represents a nullification of human presence. The soaring, imaginative responses to an awesome environment conceived by the speaker and projected into the ethos of the black people are here displaced by indifferent or unperceptive rabbits. The rich, figuratively inflamed imagination of that "genius of the South/With blood-hot eyes and cane-lipped scented breath" ought to have set the forest ablaze with its golden intensity of "pine-needles,/Dipped in western horizon gold." But not so much as a glowing sawdust pile intrudes. The virgin forest, as the poem's title suggests, nullifies the speaker's imagination by rendering it ineffectual. The bonfires of "Georgia Dusk" become metaphors of the sun, the smoldering sawdust, and the speaker's imagination. "Nullo" represents a tiny spark remaining after a huge bonfire: it can be fanned back to a semblance of its old life, but without new fuel, the flame will die.

The urgent desire of the speaker to communicate his revelations about the black genius undergoes further metamorphoses. In "Evening Song," the "fires" are those of love:

Full moon rising on the waters of my heart,  
 Lakes and moon and fires,  
 Cloine tires,  
 Holding her lips apart.

Promises of slumber leaving shore to charm the moon,  
 Miracle made vesper-keeps,  
 Cloine sleeps,  
 And I'll be sleeping soon.

Cloine, curled like the sleepy waters where the moon-waves start,  
 Radiant, resplendently she gleams,  
 Cloine dreams,  
 Lips pressed against my heart (35).

Not only love, but significantly spent love sets the imagery in this poem. The sun has set, replaced by the rising moon.<sup>18</sup> And the speaker extends the metaphors of night and day, representing the epoch of black culture, to the condition of his own heart. The dusk, representing heightened awareness of the speaker's ethnic identity, has been superseded by the paler glow of the full moon. The moon, with its aura of omen, figuratively rises on the speaker's heart, and the heart, the seat of human passion, ambiguously mingles fire, water, and moon. The sensuous and sensual elements in the poem show that the speaker has not given up his ethnic commitment. And though the passions are spent, the presence of "Lakes and moon and fires" connotes renewal.

But what kind of renewal is implied in the rising of the moon? The moon can never match the blaze of sunset. If this image

---

<sup>18</sup>Krasny, p. 65, connects the sensuality of "Evening Song" to Karintha, Becky, Carma, and Fern. Bell, 256, also sees a cyclic pattern in the waxing and waning of the moon.

represents renewal, its placement in the structural decline following the intense affirmation of "Song of the Son" and "Georgia Dusk"--and, indeed, the nullification of "Nullo"--marks a significant new direction in Part I. If the speaker's love metaphorically represents his affirmation of racial identity, then Cloine represents the black culture. She metaphorically sails out on the waters of the speaker's heart, drifting in sleep where the "Promises of slumber leaving shore to charm the moon" connote a serene mastery of the future. Even the form of the poem, returning to a more formal arrangement after the brief, uneven lines of "Nullo," suggests this mastery. The twelve lines are arranged in three quatrains, rimed abba. These lines are uneven metrically and rhythmically. But the third and fourth lines of each quatrain are metrically constant, creating a special effect by drawing attention to them: "Cloine tires, . . . Cloine sleeps, . . . Cloine dreams. . . ." The downward trend of the physical, with its metaphoric connotations of withdrawal and repletion, is balanced by the upward yearning of the imagination, the tighter rhythms of the one by the looser rhythms of the other.

The sense of security, however, must be tempered by the images of moon and dream. Promises made by moonlight are often broken by daylight. The full moon, inconstancy, and impending danger are often associated. The speaker connects the miraculous vespers of "Georgia Dusk" with Cloine. She becomes one of the "cornfield concubines" in the second quatrain: "Miracle made vesper-keeps." And in the final quatrain, she is linked with the moon itself. She gleams,

"Radiant, resplendently," as she curls in "the sleepy waters where the moon-waves start." Drowsing in the speaker's embrace, this personification of the epoch of the slavery past presses her lips against his heart. "Evening Song" is thus a pale reflection of the fires of dusk, representing a slight rise in thematic development following the sense of vacuum in "Nullo." The arrival of night, the poet's drowsing imagination, and imminent sleep, clearly signal a thematic close. The poet who returns to his spiritual homeland, symbolically to plant a seed, performs an act of homage and love. He metaphorically enters into the mystical experience at the end of "Georgia Dusk" and recreates in his heart the purity that has been lost by the incursions of civilization.

With "Conversion" and "Portrait in Georgia," the speaker abandons the hope of renewal. At least, the imagery falls to its darkest and bleakest aspect, and brings the poetry of the first part of Cane to a close. "Conversion" immediately proclaims the falsification of the purer Negro strain in its commercialized counterpart:<sup>19</sup>

African Guardian of Souls,  
 Drunk with rum,  
 Feasting on a strange cassava,  
 Yielding to new words and a weak palabra

---

<sup>19</sup>Bell, 256, astutely relates the poem to Barlo's sermon: it "heightens the meaning of the parable in Barlo's sermon by exposing the Christian deception of substituting a 'white-faced sardonic god' for the 'African Guardian of Souls.'" But Bell does not seem to think that the "African Guardian" has himself been "converted," thus deceived. Krasny, pp. 65-66, more clearly shows that whites alienate blacks from their essential spirits through Christianity.



Of a white-faced sardonic god--  
 Grins, cries  
 Amen,  
 Shouts hosanna (49).

The declamatory style helps to underscore the sententiousness of the figure portrayed in the poem. Here, the Negro folk-preacher, the "African Guardian of Souls," undergoes a double "Conversion." Apparently weakened by drinking the white man's "spirits," and eating his debilitating food, this "guardian" yields to the false god. At first, this "white-faced sardonic god" seems to be a reference to the white man's God and to the white man's culture.<sup>20</sup> But such an interpretation is inconsistent with the exalted dreams of Christ previously introduced in the poetry. Significantly, acts of feasting and drinking do not elevate this man's spirit, though the Preacher's cries of "Amen" and "hosanna" show a debased echo of "the Chorus of the cane." There may also be a play on the "Oracular. . . . Deep-rooted cane" in the mention of "strange cassava," for it is the root of this latter plant that is eaten. The imagery and the language of the poem thus show a shift in values. The "weak palabra/Of a white-faced sardonic god" represents a shift in language and behavior suggestive of the moon: the spell cast by the moonlight and the sense of alienation from the true light of the sun are evoked.

But as the weight of the poetry thus far suggests, the fierce and brilliant sunset characterizes the black experience. The

---

<sup>20</sup>Neither Bell nor Krasny comment on the apparent contradiction. Christianity may be deceptive, in the case of Barlo, but in "Georgia Dusk," the conversion is one of exaltation and beauty.

light of day is associated with oppressive toil in the fields or the encroachment of the white man's civilization. The rising of the moon suggests a respite from the implied rising of the sun. Yet in "Conversion," we see that the moon is linked with the folk-preacher who, in turn, becomes the white man's underling. Toomer's poem clearly satirizes this "African Guardian of Souls," hinting at the bitter denunciation of the preacher's influence on black people in "Kabnis." Thus the moon, master of illusion, ambiguously mingles hope and decline under the spell of the white man's influence.

The moon image persists through "Blood-Burning Moon," the short story which concludes Part I. But in "Portrait in Georgia," which immediately follows "Conversion," the moon is present only as an implied link with the night of a lynching. This, the briefest and starkest of the poems in Part I, reverts partly to the form of "Face":

Hair--braided chestnut,  
           coiled like a lyncher's rope,  
 Eyes--fagots,  
 Lips--old scars, or the first red blisters,  
 Breath--the last sweet scent of cane,  
 And her slim body, white as the ash  
           of black flesh after flame (50).

Gone is the loftiness of the hair in the earlier poem, "silver gray,/ like streams of stars," replaced here by an image of terror, "a lyncher's rope." The coal-like eyes and "the last sweet scent of cane" recall the "blood-hot eyes" and "cane-lipped scented breath" of the "genius of the South" with trenchant irony. The last line apparently alludes to the black woman watching a black man burned after being bound by the "lyncher's rope," foreshadowing the events in



"Blood-Burning Moon." Significantly, her body has turned "white as the ash of black flesh after flame." In effect, this image is another "conversion," the climactic incandescence of "Georgia Dusk" reaching its anticlimax. The further allegorical implications of the black race consumed by the white accord with Toomer's assertion that the "Negro is in solution, in the process of solution. As an entity the race is losing its body, and its soul is approaching a common soul."<sup>21</sup>

If the structural and thematic development of the poetry in Part I suggests the speaker's awareness that the vibrant elements of the Negro's racial heritage are diluted in the pale, fragmented creature in the concluding poem, the poetic pairings in Part II demonstrate that the transformation has not been reduced entirely to impotence. After the climactic affirmation of "Song of the Son" and "Georgia Dusk," and, to a lesser extent, of "Evening Song," the speaker withdraws, once again, to the status of onlooker. This withdrawal persists in the opening pieces of Part II, but, by degrees, he emerges as one of the transformed Negroes.

The transformation is revealed partly in the structural variations in the poetic prefaces. For, as in Part I, each of the major prose pieces is preceded by a pair of shorter, poetic pieces. Three of these shorter pieces, eight in all, are not strictly poems.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup>Bell, 257, somehow sees in the poem's imagery a link between southern ritual lynching and myths of white purity and black bestiality.

<sup>22</sup>Ackley, 54, points out that "Seventh Street" and "Rhobert" are prose-poems, but Bell does not include them in his article on the unity of the poems.



But they are so clearly poetic in nature and bear so much a similar function, structurally and thematically, as did the poems in Part I, that they may be considered prose-poems. The poems of Part II do not simply repeat the short-long relationships of Part I, nor are they arranged in the step-like pattern. Indeed, the opening prose-poems are the longest of the poetic pairings. But thematically, they establish a relationship between the environment and the individual resembling the initial pairing in Part I.

The transformation is further revealed in the shift from the setting in the rural South to the "northern" milieu of Washington, D.C. Strictly speaking, Washington was not North in the 1920's as far as racial attitudes go. But Toomer seems to be more concerned with the urbanized milieu of the city as a thematic element than in the politics of Jim Crow. At first glance, the opening of Part II appears to have more in common with the opening piece of Part I, "Karintha," than with the poetry. "Seventh Street" begins with a four line epigraph:

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

These lines contrast with the epigraph to "Karintha":

Her skin is like dusk on the eastern horizon,  
 O cant you see it, O cant you see it,  
 Her skin is like dusk on the eastern horizon  
 . . . When the sun goes down (1).

The activities on "Seventh Street" make no reference to sunset, the lines are rimed abba, and outer lines of pentameter enclose lines of

tetrameter. But the contrast between the two epigraphs is a superficial one. The epigraph is clearly meant to recall the opening of Part I. What distinguishes "Seventh Street" is the way in which it deals with setting rather than specific human character, and, in this respect, recalls also the landscape in "Reapers." The piece effectively fuses the narrative and poetic elements of Part I and projects them into the new setting. Instead of the black reapers moving rhythmically through the fields with their scythes, we have "Bootleggers in silken shirts . . . zooming . . . whizzing down the street-car tracks." The lines almost jingle, appropriately matching the restless, spendthrift atmosphere. There is also the implied aggressiveness of a people "on the make."<sup>23</sup> The bootleggers and the easy money reflect a sharp shift in the values of the urban as compared with the rural Negro. Perhaps the easy lyricism helps tone down some of the aggressiveness.

But in the body of the prose-poem, the aggressiveness becomes completely uninhibited:

Seventh Street is a bastard of Prohibition and the War. A crude-boned, soft-skinned wedge of nigger life breathing its loafer air, jazz songs and love, thrusting unconscious rhythms, black reddish blood into the white and whitewashed wood of Washington. Stale soggy wood of Washington (71).

---

<sup>23</sup>Krasny, p. 66, finds the opening of the second part of Cane "less poetic" than that of Part I. Dillard, p. 63, sees the "Blood-suckers" as the bootleggers who victimize "soft-skinned" migrants. Perhaps both views tend to overlook the essential poetry which Toomer projects into "low life," some of which is certainly not very pleasant. Thus, the seamy, corrupt aspect of "nigger life" need not be less poetic, nor need it appear in social protest.





The opening line proclaims the central metaphor of the piece and a dominant theme of Cane. The images that follow mince no words in mixing crudity and sensuality and sensuousness. The overpowering image of the "wedge of nigger life" fragmenting the "stale soggy wood of Washington" to thrust "unconscious rhythms, black reddish blood" into the metaphoric white life of the city is heightened by the strongly sibilant sounds contrasting with the gliding "w's." Again, the onomatopoetic sibilants recall the reapers with their scythes. Here, too, the cutting is "unconscious," suggesting the indifference of the earlier poem. The aggression becomes more a natural drive than open hostility. And that aspect of the drive is crucial, for "Seventh Street" reverses the overpowering effect of white culture in Part I. The present piece shows the black man's incursions into white society. The shift from rural to urban milieu has not robbed the blacks of their vitality and "colorful" ways.

The idea that the black race metaphorically mixes in with the white continues in the lines that follow:

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? (71)

Contact with the "soggy wood," the stale, enervating influence of the white race, can rust the "wedges." So the speaker apostrophizes them, urging them to chop away the threat to their "edge." He recalls the splendor of the sun in "Georgia Dusk," reflecting on the brilliance of the wedges as they fragment the wood into ribbons that blow away in

the wind. The question, "Who set you flowing?" repeated four times, poses the riddle of the Negro's paradoxical resurgence. The brash, hustling energy that animates these people would overpower anyone audacious enough to try to drain it: "Blood suckers of the War would spin in a frenzy of dizziness if they drank your blood. Prohibition would put a stop to it." The powerful current, running down the "smooth asphalt of Seventh Street," washes away the "white and whitewash" in a torrent that eddies and swirls into "a blood-red smoke up where the buzzards fly in heaven" (71-2). This new sacrament of "black reddish blood" assaults God himself, "A Nigger God! He would duck his head in shame and call for the Judgment Day." Thus Part II begins with a carnival inversion of the exalted conclusion of "Georgia Dusk."

Just as the climax of "Georgia Dusk" elevates the black people to a mystical union with Christ through a paradoxical fusion of the primitive and the sophisticated, so the culmination of "Seventh Street" elevates anew. The vesper-like caroling of the Negroes in the earlier poem purified; the torrent of blood contaminates. The tabernacle of the rural scene is suffused with an incense-sacrifice of pine-smoke; the tabernacle of the urban scene, with "blood-red smoke." Both celebrate and affirm, though in quite different ways. And by fusing poetic and narrative techniques, Toomer complements his theme of cultural transformation with that of form. "Seventh Street" ends as it began, with a reiteration of the epigraph, restating the pattern of "Karintha."

"Rhobert," paired with "Seventh Street," focuses on an individual's entrapment by the "dictie" values represented by the whitewashed wood.<sup>24</sup> A series of telescoping images portrays him as a grotesque, insect-like creature sinking in mud:

Rhobert wears a house, like a monstrous diver's helmet, on his head. His legs are banty-bowed and shaky because as a child he had rickets. He is way down. Rods of the house like antennae of a dead thing, stuffed, prop up in the air. He is way down. He is sinking. His house is a dead thing that weights him down. He is sinking as a diver would sink in mud should the water be drawn off (73).

Unlike the river of "black reddish blood" that audaciously assaults heaven, Rhobert's milieu drags him down. That is, his house-helmet, his body, and the water create a precarious balance of elements in which Rhobert appears to be sinking. This appearance is ascribed, on the metaphoric level, to his having adopted the values of the urban white culture: the possession of a house symbolizes white middle-class values. This situation is made more grotesque by his "banty-bowed" legs which metaphorically seem bowed by the weight of his house, though we are told the actual cause of this physical deformity. Since the black people of the rural scene were not portrayed with such physical defects, there is an implied suggestion that the urban scene is in some way responsible for Rhobert's condition. The description of the house-helmet as a dead, insect-like thing renders Rhobert even more bizarre. And under the oppressive burden of this dead weight, he sinks in the mud "as a diver would . . . should the water be drawn off."

---

<sup>24</sup>Krasny, p. 68, sees "Rhobert" as a satire of white middle-class values.

At first, the tentative phrasing, ". . . should the water be drawn off," gives the impression that the water is not being drained and that Rhobert sinks because, somehow, it fails to provide buoyancy. But as the piece continues, the implications of the draining water become clearer:

Life is a murky, wiggling, microscopic water that compresses him. Compresses his helmet and would crush it the minute that he pulled his head out. He has to keep it in. Life is water that is being drawn off.

Brother, life is water that is being drawn off.  
Brother, life is water that is being drawn off (73).

Water metaphorically represents life, but not all life. The "murky, wiggling, microscopic water that compresses him" alludes to the "Seventh Street" milieu which swirls about him. Rhobert, apparently, has adopted white middle-class values to insulate himself against this compressive medium. In fact, his head and the house-helmet become so mutually interdependent, that he must keep his head inside so that neither will be crushed by the pressure. And while Rhobert is trapped by this distorted relationship, the repeated lines at the end of the paragraph, like a refrain from a lugubrious ballad, emphasizes that the water is indeed being drawn off. By adopting white cultural values, Rhobert buries his head while his racial heritage is dissipated.<sup>25</sup>

As these images develop in the second paragraph of the prose-poem, they reveal increasingly the speaker's contempt for Rhobert and his values:

---

<sup>25</sup>Roberta Riley, "Search for Identity and Artistry," CLA Journal, 17 (June 1974) 480, says that Rhobert "sinks into the mire of materialism."

The dead house is stuffed. The stuffing is alive. It is sinful to draw one's head out of live stuffing in a dead house. The propped-up antennae would cave in and the stuffing be strewn . . . shredded life-pulp . . . in the water. It is sinful to have one's own head crushed (73).

This ironic projection of Rhobert's inner struggle through the speaker's eyes takes on a caustic tone. The repeated references to "stuffed" suggest that Rhobert clutters up his house with possessions as he clutters up his mind. For him, the "stuffing" is alive, meaningful, whereas the speaker clearly implies that it is as inert as the house itself. Apparently, Rhobert even attaches religious significance to maintaining the "stuffing," although at first the statement, "It is sinful to draw one's head out of live stuffing in a dead house," sounds ironic. The whole picture of the deformed creature that Rhobert has become struggling to support his house amid the implied, vital way of life eddying around him, expresses the speaker's scorn.

But there are faint stirrings of compassion in the portrait:

Rhobert is an upright man whose legs are banty-bowed and shaky because as a child he had rickets. The earth is round. Heaven is a sphere that surrounds it. Sink where you will. God is a Red Cross man with a dredge and a respiration pump who's waiting for you at the opposite periphery. God built the house. He blew his breath into its stuffing. It is good to die obeying Him who can do those things (74).

Even though the speaker satirizes the smugness with which Rhobert seems to invest his property, his characterization notes the pervasiveness of Rhobert's condition. In following a restatement of Rhobert's rickety legs with an apparently irrelevant reference to the roundness of the earth enclosed within the sphere of heaven, the speaker alludes to

widespread deformity. He also alludes to the sun and moon images in Part I. And in the contemptuous rendering of God as "a Red Cross man with a dredge and a respiration pump," the speaker recreates the scorn of "Conversion." The vignette becomes a sardonic commentary on the Creation in which the Red Cross man re-enacts God's breathing life into Adam with a respirator. The indictment of the artificial mechanized urban culture is scathing.

Within the context of these increasingly contrived images, Toomer extends the metaphors of Creation to a satiric redemption. He substitutes metaphor for metaphor until the scene becomes a knot of associations from the first part of Cane and Christian theology:

A futile something like the dead house wraps the live stuffing of the question: how long before the water will be drawn off? 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. One thing about him goes straight to the heart. He has an Adam's-apple which strains sometimes as if he were painfully gulping great globules of air . . . air floating shredded life-pulp. It is a sad thing to see a banty-bowed, shaky, ricket-legged man straining the raw insides of his throat against smooth air (74).

The speaker's substitution of "a futile something" for his previously quite concrete image of the diver's helmet creates a greater abstraction than that created by the convoluted metaphors. Does the phrase mean that Rhobert experiences some intuition of his error. The question that follows the colon, a repetition of the water-life metaphor, suggests that Rhobert does realize, at some level, what the speaker realizes. But Rhobert is indifferent. The psychological pressure of



his lifestyle convinces him that it is divinely ordained. The ironic reference to Rhobert's joy in dreaming about his drowned family suggests that he sees it in the same light as his own "sinking," i.e., as part of the divine plan. The contrast between the heightened awareness of the Negro singers in the rural Georgia setting and the twisted, materialistic worship of Rhobert in the urban, once more gives thematic weight to the encroachment of the white man's civilization. Even the laborious joke about Rhobert's "Adam's-apple," reminding us that the apple was Adam's downfall, compounds the irony. Devotion to this strange God has made Rhobert a pathetic figure. And though the speaker ridicules him, he is at last moved to pity.

The contrived images of "Rhobert" characterize the urban, middle-class Negro's "conversion" to the white man's God. Rhobert strains and gulps at air, at that most natural of acts, breathing. The metaphors strain and labor to caricature the man. As a parting tribute, the speaker apostrophizes his black brothers;

Soon people will be looking at him and calling him a strong man. No doubt he is for one who has had rickets. Lets give it to him, Lets call him great when the water shall have been all drawn off. Lets build a monument and set it in the ooze where he goes down. A monument of hewn oak, carved in nigger-heads. Lets open our throats, brother, and sing "Deep River" when he goes down.

Brother, Rhobert is sinking.  
 Lets open our throats, brother,  
 Lets sing Deep River when he goes down (75).

Even here, the tribute mixes with satire. The speaker acknowledges a certain perverse strength in Rhobert's stance. The reference to the oak "carved in nigger-heads" ironically suggests primitive African





carvings and the contempt of whites for black physiognomy. And the reference to "Deep River," one of the Negro slave songs which Toomer admired so much, adds sentimental tenderness to thoroughly confuse the sardonic tone.

The poetic function of "Seventh Street" and "Rhobert" is revealed in the absence of essential "story." Both sketches show elements of conflict, but highly concentrated in images, metaphors, and symbols, owing more to poetic method than to narrative. And though the sketches are not set in poetic form, the language is repetitive and rhythmic. These elements tend to dominate in the more straightforward prose pieces as well. But as these pieces are more extended and do tell more of a story, they may be differentiated from the "prose-poems." Clearly, Toomer experiments with form, and as the relationship between theme and structure becomes more apparent, his purpose will also emerge.

With "Beehive" and "Storm Ending," Toomer returns to a more easily recognized poetic form, one which is thematically related to "Seventh Street" and the poems in Part I emphasizing moon imagery:<sup>26</sup>

Within this black hive to-night  
 There swarm a million bees;  
 Bees passing in and out the moon,  
 Bees escaping out the moon,

---

<sup>26</sup>Bell, 257, sees this poem as a spiritual failure through mechanical activity, while Krasny, pp. 77-78, sees the drone's wish to transcend existence as an identification with the natural and cyclical processes of the soil. Barbara Christian, "Spirit Bloom in Harlem: The Search for a Black Aesthetic During the Harlem Renaissance, The Poetry of Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, and Jean Toomer" (Columbia University, 1970) unpubl. diss., p. 89, points out that "Beehive" and "Storm Ending" often harken back to the grace and ease of rural life."

Bees returning through the moon,  
 Silver bees intently buzzing,  
 Silver honey dripping from the swarm of bees  
 Earth is a waxen cell of the world comb,  
 And I, a drone,  
 Lying on my back,  
 Lipping honey,  
 Getting drunk with silver honey,  
 Wish that I might fly out past the moon  
 And curl forever in some far-off farmyard flower (89).

The poem is by no means conventional in the sense of rhythm or meter. The emphatic reiteration of "bees" and "moon" provides the kind of stress to be found in the prose. In technique, "Beehive" most resembles that of "Conversion" and "Portrait in Georgia," poems that, thematically, represent the nadir of black experience in the rural South. Thematically, however, the present poem owes more to the dreaminess of "Evening Song." Though the frame of reference is entirely different, the speaker, characterizing himself as a drone, drowns as sensuously as in the earlier poem. The hive as a metaphor for the black community connotes the northern, urban setting. In the commonplace symbol of industry and purposeful activity, the bee, Toomer also suggests the deadening uniformity and conformity of "Rhobert."

Coupled with the dominance of the moon, the hive image of the poem does carry the implications of the "Negro . . . in solution." The diurnal bee has been turned into a nocturnal creature with a moon for its hive. Against this background of humming activity, the speaker lies, the stereotypical drone, indolent and unproductive. The drone's relation to the hive reverses Rhobert's relation to the Seventh Street scene. The hive, indeed, is another metaphor for Rhobert's values,

associated with the moon phase of black experience. Even the sweetness of "dark skinned life," earlier connected with "cane-lipped scented breath" and the gold of the setting sun, takes on a silver tinge in this poem. As in "Georgia Dusk," in which the promise of night introduces an element of escape, the speaker renews this association. The "Bees passing in and out the moon,/Bees escaping out the moon,/Bees returning through the moon" are picked up again in the final image, the speaker's wish to "fly out past the moon/And curl forever in some far-off farmyard flower." The wish is both a desire to transcend the hive mentality and an unrealistic urge to return to a womb-like state. The "farmyard flower" represents the innocent, rural environment of the old South.

The recurring sun and moon imagery, associated with the Negro's shifting human condition as black experience shifts from rural South to urban North, begins to take on major symbolic meaning. The sun-phase and moon-phase of the Negro's progress are not, however, static. In line eight of "Beehive," the speaker refers to the earth as "a waxen cell of the world comb," relating worldly experience to a larger context. "The world" here takes on a more universal meaning than the planet earth. This idea appears in "Rhobert," a Negro who, the speaker imagines, visualizes his round earth as bounded within the sphere of heaven. The spheres of earth and heaven, of sun and moon, seem to represent spheres of experience, phases of black experience. And the speaker implies that this shifting pattern is leading somewhere, despite the rather futile-sounding conclusion of "Beehive."

If Rhobert affirms the moon-phase, the speaker denies it: it drugs him. What, then, does the speaker affirm? He clearly understands that the wish to "curl forever" is indeed a wish.

If "Beehive" stresses a moon-and-silver phase of the urban Negro experience, "Storm Ending" stresses a sun-and-gold phase.<sup>27</sup>

The lyrical imagery associated with the rural South combines with that of the former poem to produce a more vibrant dream. The atmosphere recalls that of "Seventh Street":

Thunder blossoms gorgeously above our heads,  
Great, hollow, bell-like flowers,  
Rumbling in the wind,  
Stretching clappers to strike our ears . .  
Full-lipped flowers  
Bitten by the sun  
Bleeding rain  
Dripping rain like golden honey--  
And the sweet earth flying from the thunder (90).

Once again, the aggressive images build through strong images and verbs to culminate in those two essences of black experience, sweetness and violence. The opening metaphor of thunder as blossoms that rumble like great bells fuses two natural elements of quite different character. The violence of the verbs, "Rumbling," "Bitten," "Bleeding," contrasts with the gentler noun images, "Full-lipped flowers," "rain like golden honey," "sweet earth." Only in the "Full-lipped flowers" does the speaker hint at a direct association of these images with

---

<sup>27</sup> Bell, 257, curiously, finds in "Storm Ending" a human insensitivity to nature. Innes, 313-14, more aptly comments on the gold and silver motifs which link this poem, "Beehive," and the sun and moon imagery.

Negroid physical characteristics. Otherwise, the poem relies upon the previously established images in earlier poems to carry the thematic significance of the images. The flowers are at once symbols of natural forces that create and destroy. They are emblems of fertility, the promise of survival, and therefore emblems of beauty as well. But they contain energies which, uncontrolled as in thunder, bode violence and upheaval. The metaphoric idea that the sun, biting the flowers, causes the "bleeding rain" is an imaginative response to the question posed in "Seventh Street":

Black reddish blood. Pouring for crude-boned soft-skinned  
life, who set you flowing? (71)

And the silver honey of the moon becomes the golden honey of the sun, nicely modulating similar elements of sweetness and color from the poems of Part I. The drone's wish to "curl forever in some far-off farmyard flower" is rudely shattered by the stormy day, making it clear that a flower makes an uncertain bed. Thus the dream of returning to an earlier, simpler, more "natural" way of life becomes unrealistic.

This idea becomes increasingly clear in the remaining poems of Part II. The parallel between the contrasting phases of sun and moon imagery and Negro development in the South and the North is extended in "Her Lips Are Copper Wire." As the title immediately suggests, the dominant metaphor of this poem compares human physiognomy to machine-made objects:

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

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

telephone the power-house  
that the main wires are insulate

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

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

An unusual feature of this poem is the absence of capitals and punctuation marks. Since the poem apostrophizes the speaker's love in a completely dehumanized, technological framework, this feature seems to be an implied commentary.<sup>28</sup> The speaker invokes his love through a novel metaphor for the intimate words of sweethearts, the "whisper of yellow globes" that illuminates the fogbound street. The reference to "bootleg licker drinkers" echoes the epigraph in "Seventh Street," restating the scene of the earlier poem after the dream-like interludes of "Beehive" and "Storm Ending." The speaker calls for his love's breath to condense on him as the dew on the street lamps, then to telephone the power company that the wires can safely carry current. In parentheses, the speaker suggests that her voice animates the play of lights

---

<sup>28</sup>Krasny, p. 78, compares this poem to Whitman's "I Sing the Body Electric." But even more importantly, he notes the succession of lip images in the poems and narratives culminate in Kabnis' wish to sing. This motif is an important one to the present dissertation and has been part of the analysis provided thus far.

on billboards. And in a grotesquely erotic image, he calls on his love to remove his "insulation" and press her naked wire-lips to his own until he, too, glows.

Even though the structural plan of Part II does not exactly follow that of the first part of Cane, "Storm Ending" clearly marks a climactic scene comparable to "Georgia Dusk." The prevalence of nature imagery in both poems, the similarity in thematic statements on fertility and renewal, and their pivotal relationships to what follows occur at the structural mid-points in each part. In "Evening Song" there is a shift from the sunset revels to a moonlit love scene. In "Copper Wire" the shift is from the sun-inspired storm to the pale, imitation sunlight of "yellow globes/gleaming on lamp-posts" which lights the love scene. In Part I, the shift symbolized the influence of the white race on the black, an influence of urban over rural living. In Part II, the urban influence has not yet completely displaced the vestiges of the Negro's rural vigor, the vivid, colorful style that characterized the Negro in the southern milieu. But with "Copper Wire" the Negro enters a phase even further removed from his cultural heritage. This mixture of the erotic and the technological personifies the Negro as "modern man" who has turned away from nature to embrace a "mechanical bride."

"Calling Jesus," which follows "Copper Wire," continues the sense of spiritual dislocation in a prose-poem sketch about a prostitute. Her soul has become "like a little thrust-tailed dog that follows her, whimpering." The three paragraphs develop this central image by direct and indirect references to the rural images of Part I:



She is large enough, I know, to find a warm spot for it.  
 But each night when she comes home and closes the big outside  
 storm door, the little dog is left in the vestibule, filled  
 with chills till morning. Some one . . . echo Jesus . . .  
 soft as a cotton boll brushed against the milk-pod cheek of  
 Christ, will steal in and cover it that it need not shiver,  
 and carry it to her where she sleeps upon clean hay cut in  
 her dreams (102).

The woman and her wayward soul have been alienated by the encroachments of the white man's technological, urban culture.<sup>29</sup> But in this sentimental description, the woman is portrayed as a stereotyped "prostitute with a heart of gold" who would not knowingly shut out a stray. More importantly, deep in her unconscious mind, in her dreams, lie the remnants of her racial heritage. A Jesus image, ". . . soft as a cotton boll brushed against the milk-pod cheek of Christ," is conjured up to tend her soul and restore it to her. In this way, the woman is linked with the "cornfield concubines" who are given "virgin lips" through the mystical union with Christ at the end of "Georgia Dusk." The element of fertility and renewal through a messianic figure also draws together the fragments of this thematic idea from the earlier poetry.

The second section develops the woman's deep, unconscious link with her racial past through images of the little soul-dog and of plants associated with the South:

---

<sup>29</sup>Both Fischer, 205, and Krasny, pp. 71-72, call this piece poetic prose. Both see it as pointing to a debilitated soul, with Fischer relating it specifically as a "preamble to the spiritual condition of Muriel" in "Box Seat."

When you meet her in the daytime on the streets, the little dog keeps coming. Nothing happens at first, and then, when she has forgotten the streets and alleys, and the large house where she goes to bed of nights, a soft thing like fur begins to rub your limbs, and you hear a low, scared voice, lonely, calling, and you know that a cool something nozzles moisture in your palms. Sensitive things like nostrils, quiver. Her breath comes sweet as honeysuckle whose pistils bear the life of a coming song. And her eyes carry to where builders find no need for vestibules, for swinging on iron hinges, storm doors (102-03).

Aside from the sentimentality of characterizing the prostitute's soul as a pathetic little dog, the chief reason for the image seems to be the animal's instinctual nature. Once again, the moist breath with its sweetness, sometimes of cane, sometimes of honey in the previous poems, and of the honeysuckle here, focuses in elements of fertility. The pistils, the organ of flowers which carry the seeds of renewal, are linked with song, recalling the "Song of the Son." The woman senses this aspect of her nature whenever the "storm door" consciousness fades and her mind reverts to a simpler, less inhibited culture.

Much of the third section repeats the ideas of the first two paragraphs. The woman still needs the messianic figure from her racial consciousness to redeem her. Another image of fertility and of natural objects limited by the artificial is introduced in the flowering chestnut trees on streets "where dusty asphalt has been freshly sprinkled with clean water." But the piece ends with the dream and not with the reality:

Some one . . . echo Jesus . . . soft as the bare feet of Christ moving across bales of southern cotton, will steal in and cover it that it need not shiver, and carry it to her where she sleeps: cradled in dream-fluted cane (103).

The prose-poem builds on the imagery of the earlier poems, especially the flowers and other plants that represent the rural South. The prostitute becomes the ultimate in disoriented, dehumanized black experience. But she has not entirely lost her ancestral past. The speaker has returned again and again to the theme of renewal, to associations with a messianic figure, strongly implying that he hopes to find a redeemer among his people. Increasingly, the hope has been couched in the language of dreams, and the condition of the black people portrayed in weakened, degenerating values. If "Song of the Son" and "Georgia Dusk" represent the highest point of the dream, "Copper Wire" and "Calling Jesus" represent its nadir.

Because there are only four major prose pieces in Part II instead of the six in Part I, and because Toomer did not choose to end the second part with poetry, only one pair of poems remains. In terms of technique, "Prayer" and "Harvest Song" are typical. But thematically, the poems offer marked departures. "Prayer," especially, breaks away from the theme of the Negro as Negro. The speaker places the racial entity into a larger framework, hoping to "see" in a spiritual rather than a physical way:<sup>30</sup>

My body is opaque to the soul.  
 Driven of the spirit, long have I sought to temper it  
     unto the spirit's longing,  
 But my mind, too, is opaque to the soul.  
 A closed lid is my soul's flesh-eye.  
 O Spirits of whom my soul is but a little finger,  
 Direct it to the lid of its flesh-eye.  
 I am weak with much giving.  
 I am weak with the desire to give more.

---

<sup>30</sup>Of the few critical references to this poem, Lieber's, 43, best sums up the plea for "self-integration."



(How strong a thing is the little finger!)  
 So weak that I have confused the body with the soul,  
 And the body with its little finger.  
 (How frail is the little finger.)  
 My voice could not carry to you did you dwell in  
     stars,  
 O Spirits of whom my soul is but a little finger . . (131)

The poem is unusual also in that, for the first time, it deals entirely with the speaker's explicit feelings. The speaker emerges at last into the first person. The opening line of the poem sets as the barrier to the soul not the "storm doors" of white culture, but the limitations of mind and body. Driven by some animus, the speaker says that he has sought mastery of mind over body, but he has been frustrated by the limitations of his mind because his mind has been deluded by his senses: his "mind, too, is opaque to the soul./A closed lid is my soul's flesh-eye." When he invokes the "Spirits" of a higher reality, the speaker expresses the desire to transcend his physical limits. When he asks that his soul, metaphorically "but a little finger" of the universal, be directed toward opening "the lid of its flesh-eye," he desires to break away from physical seeing. And since all of the poetry in Cane up to "Prayer" has involved the speaker in just such physical seeing, this poem, significantly, is the most abstract. The "flesh-eye" and the "little finger" are among the most concrete images in the poem. And when the speaker says, in line ten, that he has become so weak with giving that he has "confused the body with the soul," he partly negates the images through which he sought to portray the black "soul."

In turning away from the body to the spirit, the speaker still looks within himself for guidance: "My voice could not carry



to you did you dwell in stars." As in "Calling Jesus," an instinctive something, "the soul," may yet guide the speaker to "see." This idea does not invalidate all of the images of searching for renewal. But the imperfections inherent in physical seeing are not "truth."

In "Harvest Song," the final poem in Part II, the aftermath of such a realization voiced in "Prayer," the speaker returns to the rural imagery of Part I:

I am a reaper whose muscles set at sundown. All  
     my oats are cradled.  
 But I am too chilled, and too fatigued to bind them.  
     And I hunger.

I crack a grain between my teeth. I do not taste it.  
 I have been in the fields all day. My throat is dry.  
     I hunger (132).

Though these words are arranged in poetic lines, the piece is as much a prose-poem as "Seventh Street" or "Rhobert." Here, too, the speaker uses the first person throughout, placing himself in the context of the reapers of the first poem in Part I and thereby identifying himself with them. The speaker continues the theme of exhaustion introduced in "Prayer." The sensuous revels of the earlier poems have been replaced by the negation of sense. The speaker hungers, but cannot taste food. Dusk, the period of day that stimulated to lyric outpourings earlier, now cannot displace the fatigue. All of the celebrations of black identity cannot help him now:

My eyes are caked with dust of oatfields at harvest-time.  
 I am a blind man who stares across the hills, seeking  
     stack'd fields of other harvesters.

It would be good to see them . . . crook'd, split, and  
     iron-ring'd handles of the scythes. It would be  
     good to see them, dust-caked and blind. I hunger (132).

In looking across the fields for the other reapers, the speaker seeks to communicate with them:

(Dusk is a strange fear'd sheath their blades are dull'd  
in.)  
My throat is dry. And should I call, a cracked grain  
like the oats . . . echo--

I fear to call. What should they hear me, and offer  
me their grain, oats, or wheat, or corn? I have  
been in the fields all day. I fear I could not taste  
it. I fear knowledge of my hunger (132).

What the speaker fears is the knowledge of his "hunger." That is, he is afraid that the other reapers, the blacks, the remnants of a dying culture, might learn that his hunger cannot be satisfied. Metaphorically, the speaker is saying that he has become alienated from his racial heritage. Parenthetically, he says that dusk, the time of day "Redolent of fermenting syrup" and "Deep-rooted cane," actually is the time in which "their blades are dull'd." The culture wears out in the dusk in which the speaker earlier discovered it.

His eyes "caked with dust," his throat parched, his voice suppressed by fear, the speaker's ears fail him:

My ears are caked with dust of oatfields at harvest-  
time.  
I am a deaf man who strains to hear the calls of other  
harvesters whose throats are also dry.  
  
It would be good to hear their songs . . . reapers of the  
sweet-stalk'd cane, cutters of the corn . . . even  
though their throats cracked and the strangeness  
of their voices deafened me (133).

Blind, mute, and deaf, the speaker is indeed cut off. He yearns to hear the voices of the Negroes again. He has not forgotten the association of "sweet-stalk'd cane" and the carols of the dusk. Deaf,





he would welcome deafness again if it were caused by the voices of the reapers. Nor is the failure of communication the speaker's alone. The reapers, too, have dry throats that crack in song.

Empty, drained by spiritual hunger which his senses cannot satisfy, the speaker utters his final despair:

I hunger. My throat is dry. Now that the sun has  
set and I am chilled, I fear to call. (Eoho, my  
brothers!)

I am a reaper. (Eoho!) All my oats are cradled.  
But I am too fatigued to bind them. And I hunger.  
I crack a grain. It has no taste to it. My  
throat is dry. . .

O my brothers, I beat my palms, still soft, against the  
stubble of my harvesting. (You beat your soft  
palms, too.) My pain is sweet. Sweeter than  
the oats or wheat or corn. It will not bring me  
knowledge of my hunger (133).

Like the prostitute's little dog-soul, the reaper is chilled and longs for the comfort of communication. But there is no field Jesus to provide it. The repeated references to cradled oats plays on the association of earlier poems with the dream-wish to "curl away." And even in this poem of admitted futility, the final act of the reaper, his beating his palms against the "stubble of [his] harvesting," has a dream-like quality: it deadens his hunger. The dreams of renewing the race through a culture-hero have vanished.

Proclaiming his grief at the death of his image, "the parting soul of slavery," the speaker cannot celebrate in song. He has celebrated the fading vision of the Negro and placed it in a

pastoral context. He elegiacally laments its departure. The speaker no longer affirms racial consciousness, and withdraws from direct involvement in the remainder of Cane. Henceforth, his is a purely narrative voice.

### CHAPTER III

#### THE NARRATIVES OF PART I

Because the poetry of Cane concentrates on the speaker's responses to the evolving ethos of the Negro as he moves from the rural to the urban setting, it provides a clear metaphoric and thematic nucleus for the prose. Taken as a whole, these responses unify the first two parts of the book in a way that the prose does not. The sketches and stories of Part I focus on what has been called "primitive" or "grotesque" women in a southern, rural setting.<sup>1</sup> The prose of Part II portrays their uprooted northern counterparts, men as well as women, searching for new identities in an uncongenial environment. These, indeed, have thematic unity. But the speaker of the poetry is more immediate and immanent than he seems to be in the prose, where he tends to be overshadowed by the other characters. And without the framework of his consciousness as it emerges in the poetry, the prose might seem to be a medley.

Actually, the persona of the narratives in Part I emerges gradually, as he does in the poetry, achieving a position of considerable importance as a character in the central narratives, then

---

<sup>1</sup>Robert A. Bone, *The Negro Novel in America*, rev. ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), p. 82, considers the women "primitive" and calls them "Andersonian grotesques."



recedes again.<sup>2</sup> In "Karintha," the first of the six "portraits" making up the first section of Cane, the narrator remains in the background. Yet even here, where his presence is not overt, he metaphorically suffuses the sketch with his implied responses to the woman and the southern setting. The kinship to the poetry appears in the four-line epigraph which celebrates Karintha:

Her skin is like dusk on the eastern horizon,  
 O cant you see it, O cant you see it,  
 Her skin is like dusk on the eastern horizon  
 . . . When the sun goes down (1).

This refrain-like fragment has an elegiac quality that contains an ominous mood.<sup>3</sup> The reference to dusk immediately connects with the epigraph on the title page and sets up a conflict with the setting sun. The eastern horizon, usually associated with the rising sun, hence metaphorically with hope or renewal, is rendered ambiguous with dusk. The speaker's focus on the dusk in the east rather than

---

<sup>2</sup>The mysterious persona of the narratives has received considerable attention: William C. Fischer, "The Aggregate Man in Jean Toomer's Cane," Studies in the Novel, 3 (Summer, 1971) 190-215, sees him as a composite figure of various black "types," Charles W. Scruggs, "The Mark of Cain and the Redemption of Art: A Study in Theme and Structure of Jean Toomer's Cane," American Literature, 44 (May 1972) 285, considers the narrator Toomer, himself, and identifies him as the speaker of "Song of the Son." But Susan L. Blake, "The Spectatorial Artist and the Structure of Cane," CLA Journal, 17 (June 1974) 516, more plausibly considers the narrator as both persona and voice, sharing the characters' goals. She correctly assesses this persona's story as the unifying element in the book.

<sup>3</sup>Catherine L. Innes, "The Unity of Jean Toomer's Cane," CLA Journal, 15 (March 1972) 307, points out the major importance of the dusk image in the opening epigraph. Though she limits its importance to the first part of Cane, the implications of dusk reach through the entire book.

on the brilliance of the sunset in the west--a more predictable image--adds another novel dimension. This somber quality intensifies in the rhetorical hint of failing vision in the reiterated "O cant you see it, O cant you see it" in the second line. And the ellipsis of the last line throws considerable weight on the concluding clause, ". . . When the sun goes down." When these elements are co-ordinated with Karintha's skin, the image strikes an uneasy balance between the ephemeral glory of the moment and the approaching darkness. If this play on gloom and light holds the same significance for Karintha as it did for the black people in the poetry interludes, then the mournful air bodes ill for her.

What follows this word-music is a highly metaphorical sketch of the woman. And though the narrative mode predominates over the poetic, the lyrical effect persists. The sketch opens with a bold declaration of the sexual desire of men for "this Karintha, . . . carrying beauty, perfect as dusk when the sun goes down" (1). The atmosphere is as heady and intoxicating as that in "Seventh Street." The metaphorical comparison between the woman's flesh and the fleeting moment of dusk is extended to sexuality, maturation, and ripeness, a stimulus to the appetites of men both young and old. The old men dandle Karintha "hobby-horse upon their knees" when she is a mere child. The latent sexuality of this seemingly innocent act is expressed by the narrator: "God grant us youth, secretly prayed the old men" (1). Even the young men who frolicked with her "when they should have been dancing with their

grownup girls" lend the atmosphere an overwhelming sense of desire: "This interest of the male, who wishes to ripen a growing thing too soon, could mean no good to her" (1). This urgency emphasizes the ephemeral element in the metaphors of dusk and sunset, eastern and western horizons, which characterize Karintha.

Having loaded the introduction with such heavy metaphoric freight, the narrator leaps to "Karintha, at twelve, . . . a wild flash that told the other folks just what it was to live" (1). The fleeting quality persists; the girl is an insubstantial brilliance, and such is the nature of life. The dusk and the sun are evoked again in "her sudden darting past you . . . a bit of vivid color, like a black bird that flashes in light" (2). Significantly, the narrator introduces the element of the sawmill and the pine smoke at this point, images that play a major role in Karintha's life and in the evolving identity of the black people. That Karintha represents black experience in the South continues in the imagery portraying her: her exuberant running distinguishes it from other girls', having the "sound of the red dust that sometimes makes a spiral in the road" (2). Karintha is linked with the Georgia soil, the soil that anchors cane and the black soul. And in the whirling that makes her invisible, she seems to be a dust-witch. Her voice is so shrill it makes the narrator's ears itch. Her waywardness as a child, when "she stoned the cows, and beat her dog, and fought the other children. . .," only led the preacher to tell "himself that she was as innocently lovely as a November cotton flower" (2). Thus



Karintha transcends the bounds of convention.<sup>4</sup> Left to herself, her unique properties might have developed along quite different lines.

But a "November cotton flower" blooms out of season, and in an environment where the sexual appetites of men urge them "to ripen a growing thing too soon," opportunities abound:

Already, rumors were out about her. 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 love 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. Old men could no longer ride her hobby-horse upon their knees. But young men counted faster (2-3).

Karintha, sensitive to the cues of adults as children often are, differs in her fearless expression of them. Though she precociously exercises her seductive powers, she is still innocent. This mixture of sexual experience and innocence prefigures the virgin concubines in "Georgia Dusk," and the hint of religious conversion appears in "the way of God." But for Karintha, "the way of God" is a simple, natural law. Since the attitudes of the adults around her place her outside the conventional inhibitions, the rumors that begin to circulate about her inevitably lead her to become promiscuous.

The pause between the girl and the woman is marked by an abridged version of the epigraphic song:

---

<sup>4</sup>Patricia Chase, "The Women in Cane," CLA Journal, 14 (March 1971) 260, considers Karintha an archetypal woman and an existential question. Blake, 518, sees Karintha as a dramatization of "essential conflict between the acceptance and limitation of being." That is, Blake sees her as refusing to accept the role assigned to her by men: a prostitute.

Her skin is like dusk,  
 O cant you see it,  
 Her skin is like dusk,  
 When the sun goes down (3).

The reference to the eastern horizon has been omitted, and, metaphorically, Karintha seems to have advanced toward the night. The second phase of her development begins with a variation of the opening: "Karintha is a woman. She who carries beauty, perfect as dusk when the sun goes down" (3). But now "she has been married many times" (3). Something mysterious appears in her:

Young men run stills to make her money. Young men go to big cities and run on the road. Young men go away to college. They all want to bring her money. These are the young men who thought that all they had to do was to count time (3-4).

The young men are in fact dominated by Karintha. They drive themselves to incredible lengths to please her, and within the range of experiences cited by the narrator, one finds virtually the whole range of the Negro experience. That it should be initiated by a woman who mystifies them and whom they cannot satisfy foreshadows an important thematic element in the first part of Cane,<sup>5</sup> one that is only distantly hinted at in the poetry.

---

<sup>5</sup>Most of the commentators point out the relationship between the dusk image and Karintha's misunderstood beauty. See, for example, Innes, 307-08, Scruggs, 285, and Blake, 517. See also Mabel M. Dillard, "Jean Toomer: Herald of the Negro Renaissance" (Ohio University, 1967) unpubl. diss., p. 41; John M. Reilly, "The Search for Black Redemption: Jean Toomer's Cane," Studies in the Novel, 2 (Fall 1970) 315; Fischer, 193, suggests that the narrator suppresses part of his revelation about Karintha because she is "so perilously close to his own concerns"; Michael Jay Krasny, "Jean Toomer and the Quest for Consciousness" (University of Wisconsin, 1972) unpubl. diss., p. 52; Bowie Duncan, "Jean Toomer's Cane: A Modern Black Oracle," CLA Journal, 15 (March 1972) 325; Peter G. Kousaleos, "A Study in the Language, Structure, and Symbolism in Jean Toomer's Cane and N. Scott Momaday's House Made of Dawn," (Ohio University, 1973) unpubl. diss., p. 42.

Karintha's mystery, centered at first in her beauty carried "perfect as dusk when the sun goes down," now shifts to her child. Abruptly, almost casually, the narrator mentions that Karintha has had a child:

But Karintha is a woman, and she has had a child. 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. . . A sawmill was nearby. Its pyramidal sawdust pile smouldered. It is a year before one completely burns. Meanwhile, the smoke curls up and hangs in odd wraiths about the trees, curls up, and spreads itself out over the valley. . . Weeks after Karintha returned home the smoke was so heavy you tasted it in water (4).

This passage densely packs actions, attitudes, and images that operate on several levels simultaneously. The most immediate concern, what is happening, is by no means simple. The narrator describes Karintha's involvement in the birth of her child matter-of-factly; the child simply "fell out of her womb." And without ever saying so directly, the narrator allows the inference to grow in the reader's mind that Karintha has cold-bloodedly buried her newborn baby in the smoldering sawdust pile nearby. But was the baby stillborn, or did Karintha see it as a hindrance to her promiscuous life style?<sup>6</sup> In the former case, her action shows a bizarre lack of feeling that certainly accords with the narrator's judgment that she was a growing thing ripened too soon. In the latter, commonly accepted possibility, she grotesquely murders

---

<sup>6</sup>Several critics maintain that Karintha murders her baby. See, e.g., Bone, p. 80, where he implies that she does, and esp. his review of the book's reprint for the New York Times Book Review (January 19, 1969), p. 3, where he says so quite explicitly. Fischer, 193 and 212, seconds his opinion.

her child. Perhaps the clue lies in the way the baby "fell out of her womb." There is a lifelessness about the description that suggests that the baby was indeed stillborn. In view of the narrator's silence on the condition of the baby, there does not seem to be any way of definitively resolving the point. Either possibility might conceivably fall within Karintha's motivations. Both are shrouded by her "mystery."

But the death of Karintha's child connotes sterility, not only for Karintha whose development has been stunted by the desire of the men, but also for the men themselves as representatives of the black race. The symbolic significance of the child's birth and death, hinted at in this scene, evolves and intensifies as the narrator picks up elements and weaves them into the fabric of the poems and sketches that follow. The effect of the description of Karintha's delivery is not unlike that of the reapers sharpening their scythes, ". . . as a thing that's done," in the poem that follows "Karintha." And Karintha's disposing of the child in a nearby sawdust pile has some of the same indifference of the horse-drawn mower which continues "cutting weeds and shade" after cutting through the field rat. Moreover, the delicacy of the pine-needles, revealed in their yielding to the feet of rabbits--symbols of fertility--contrasts with the barrenness of the nearby sawdust pile.<sup>7</sup> This image foreshadows both "Nullo," which generalizes the mood of Karintha's behavior into a symbolic nullification, and the

---

<sup>7</sup>Krasny, p. 64, recognizes the rabbit and pine-needle image as a foreshadowing of "Nullo."



central poems of affirmation, "Song of the Son" and "Georgia Dusk," which juxtapose the sawmill and its by-product, the fragmented forest, with the narrator's self-discovery. The pyramidal sawdust pile, the only monument the dead child will know, consumes both itself and the child, polluting air and water. The odd trails of pine-smoke, like wraiths, suggest that the child's ghost haunts the atmosphere.<sup>8</sup> They are absorbed into the dusk imagery through which the narrator magically conjures up his ethnic identity as he surveys the South. Thus a child, which symbolizes racial renewal, is absorbed by images of death and sterility, by emblems of the encroaching white civilization on the black rural way of life, by the pollution of water, itself a symbol of purification and life.

The sketch concludes with a restatement of its opening, the transition marked by a spiritual-like song:

Smoke is on the hills. Rise up.  
Smoke is on the hills, O rise  
And take my soul to Jesus (4).

This little song serves as an unwitting requiem for the dead child. But it also serves as a reminder that the smoke which taints the atmosphere implies guilt. This prayer for redemption reaches the empyrean in "Georgia Dusk." Here, the image of smoke, that which rises up, like the soul, yet hangs heavy in the atmosphere, seems deceptively naive. And Karintha, cut loose from the "way of God," continues to mystify the men who want her:

---

<sup>8</sup>Most critics see the smoke as in some way the soul of Karintha rather than her baby. See Chase, 260, and Blake, 519.

Karintha is a woman. Men do not know that the soul of her was a growing thing ripened too soon. They will bring their money; they will die not having found it out. . . Karintha at twenty, carrying beauty, perfect as dusk when the sun goes down (4-5).

The narrator returns to the image of Karintha as a figure of the dusk, an ephemeral creature who can dazzle, but not satisfy. Karintha, whose mystery lay in the beauty that led to a stillborn child, remains an ironic metaphor of the black's evolving condition. The narrator conveys the depth of his feelings in the repetition of the epigraph, now clearly imbued with lamentation as he repeats the last two words separately, "Goes down. . ." (5).

Though the sketch focuses on Karintha, the concrete details portraying her have a non-objective quality. She is light, she is motion, she is mischief, she is animal, but she is not really a revealed human being. In some ways as fragmentary as "Karintha," the four episodes of "Becky," the second "portrait" of Cane, do partly reveal a human being. But the four-line epigraph which begins Becky's story starkly hints at her ultimate concealment.

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 (8).

The cursory tone of these lines does not obscure the tension implied in Becky's being "the white woman who had two Negro sons."<sup>9</sup> Her

---

<sup>9</sup>Becky is usually seen as a pariah, victimized through weaknesses inherent in a racially polarized community: Bone, pp. 82-83, Fischer, 194, Chase, 264, Duncan, 326, Blake, 519-20.

death and the sons' departure, the whispering pines and the Bible rustling on her mound, appear fragmentary and episodic, though they are not without suggestive motivation. The pines' whispering to Jesus lacks the sentiment of Karantha's woodland couch or the spiritual which sang the child to its sleep, but the image plays upon the association. The corollary rustling of the Bible's leaves shifts the weight of the image away from the hope of grace through Jesus to a terrible alienation: they rustle aimlessly.

The first episode continues the cursory tone of the epigraph into the first line: "Becky had one Negro son." But the underlying tension erupts in the next lines:

Who gave it to her? Damn buck nigger, said the white folks' mouths. She wouldnt tell. Common, God-forsaken, insane white shameless wench, said the white folks' mouths (8).

A brief description of Becky follows, one that makes her appear sexually unattractive: "Her eyes were sunken, her neck stringy, her breasts fallen, till then" (8). But until the words of the white folks reached her, she was merely unattractive. Then their words metaphorically inflate her until, "like a bubble rising . . . she broke. Mouth setting in a twist that held her eyes, harsh, vacant, staring. . ." (8). Their censure unbalanced her. The image of her mouth taking on its twisted set suggests a new perversity in her. The black community, too, joins in the condemnation using almost identical words:

Who gave it to her? Low-down nigger with no self-respect, said the black folks' mouths. She wouldnt tell. Poor Catholic poor-white crazy woman, said the black folks' mouths (8).



The effect of these two communities arrayed on either side of the accused woman is quite stylized, choric, rhythmic, chanting. Becky has violated the taboos of both communities, and their reaction does not augur well for her or her mulatto child.<sup>10</sup> The two communities join in ostracizing Becky and her child, but they secretly pray "to God who'd put His cross upon her" (8).

But though Becky's rash liaison threatens the segregated balance of the town, the people cannot bring themselves to let the woman and her child go without shelter. Furtively, denying their acts of kindness even as they do them, blacks and whites conspire to build her a cabin "on the narrow strip of land between the railroad and the road" (9). And as the narrator relates the story, he interjects appeals to Jesus: "The pines whisper to Jesus. . .," "O fly away to Jesus . . ." (9). These ejaculations have the effect of Negroes' "shouting" during sermons, and their use seems to confer a certain omniscience on the narrator. Actually, the device is in keeping with the narrator's free use of the thoughts and attitudes of others in both the poetry and the prose.

The first episode concludes with an allusion to the smoke-image of "Karintha," hinting at symbolic burial for Becky. The cabin built for her, and into which she is banished, has "a single room held down to earth. . . O fly away to Jesus . . . by a leaning

---

<sup>10</sup>Fischer, 194. Commentators seem to be unconcerned about the mulatto children.

chimney. . ." (1). The chimney, through its normal function of serving as an outlet for smoke, suggests the smoldering pyre of Karintha's baby. But, ironically, instead of allowing Becky to "fly away to Jesus," it serves to hold her to earth. The chimney's leaning also hints at instability which, subtly reinforcing the reference to Becky's mound in the epigraph, ominously foreshadows the end.

The second episode deals with Becky's terrible isolation:

Six trains each day rumbled past and shook the ground under her cabin. Fords, and horse- and mule-drawn buggies went back and forth along the road. No one ever saw her. Trainmen, and passengers who'd heard about her, threw out papers and food. Threw out little crumpled slips of paper scribbled with prayers, as they passed her eye-shaped piece of sandy ground. Ground islandized between the road and railroad track. Pushed up where a blue-sheen God with listless eyes could look at it (9).

This passage plays on the failure of vision to offset the incursions of depersonalizing industrial society.<sup>11</sup> The inciting element of the underlying image lies in the "twist that held her eyes" from the first episode. Becky's vision has already been distorted by the narrator's exposition. But indirectly, the narrator has also impugned the vision of the townspeople. Here, the narrator draws attention to Becky's condition metaphorically: in the midst of the flow of the town's

---

<sup>11</sup>Darwin Turner, In a Minor Chord: Three Afro-American Writers and Their Search for Identity (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1971), p. 16. His description of "Becky" is quite brief, but emphasizes the eye-image. Commentators have not worked out in detail the proliferation of eye images throughout Cane.



traffic, trains, automobiles, carriages, no one "sees" Becky. The passersby feed her and pray for her out of their own invisibility, hidden in their vehicles. The eye becomes the metaphor of the community's blindness: the little stretch of ground between the road and the track is "eye-shaped" and homonymically played on in "islandized." Even the passing locomotives become, collectively, ". . . a blue-sheen God with listless eyes." Hiding from each other, the townspeople take turns bringing Becky "corn and meat and sweet potatoes. Even sometimes snuff. . . O thank y Jesus. . ." (10). In tending to the necessities of Becky and her son, they even provide a pinch of luxury. Significantly, the first reference to cane after the title page occurs in this episode: "Old David Georgia, grinding cane and boiling syrup, never went her way without some sugar sap." The name of the old man, too, associated with cane, emphasizes the reference, for Georgia is the locus of Toomer's South. The narrator repeats that no one sees Becky. Her invisibility is complete.

But Becky's son is most visible. Immediately after the reference to cane--the boy is now about five years old--her son is seen carrying a baby. The placement of the two elements, the metaphor of southern experience and the children of mixed ancestry, suggests a thematic as well as structural significance. The second child, presumably fathered by a black man, brings about a new phase in Becky's ostracism. Whether the father of this child is the same as that of the first, and that, apparently, does not influence the townspeople's reaction, Becky no longer is merely invisible. She is dead. The townspeople bury her in their hearts.

The third episode develops the growing boys. The townspeople have stopped bringing Becky food, and how the boys and their mother manage to survive without help fills the townspeople with superstitious dread.

The two boys grew. Sullen and cunning. . . O pines, whisper to Jesus; tell Him to come and press sweet Jesus-lips against their lips and eyes. . . It seemed as though with those two big fellows there, there could be no room for Becky. The part that prayed and wondered if perhaps she'd really died, and they had buried her (10).

The reference to "Jesus lips" here prefigures the "cane-lipped scented mouth: in "Georgia Dusk" and, ironically, the invitation of the narrator to the disembodied spirit of technology in "Her Lips Are Copper Wire." These two latter associations show the range of the southern and northern experiences: the human element still uppermost in Part I, declining in Part II. In "Becky," the "Jesus-lips" show the power of the image in the midst of attitudes that eventually transform and dissipate that power. This power is evidenced in the dread the townspeople feel, but also in the hope that the mysterious force of the pines might make the errant boys feel. The dread also grows out of the guilt the townspeople feel for having driven Becky out of their sight.<sup>12</sup>

The boys grow increasingly truculent, beating and cutting a man without apparent provocation. The narrator, increasingly

---

<sup>12</sup>Fischer, 194, and Chase, 264, emphasize guilt-motive in the townspeople's behavior.



identifying himself as a spokesman for the townspeople,<sup>13</sup> wonders whether the man was "white or colored" (10). Given the southern setting, the townspeople's indecisiveness on the matter of the man's racial identity seems curious. Had the assaulted man been a white, it seems improbable that the white community would not have acted to punish the boys. But the story is left as a rumor, apparently out of that superstitious dread that has been developing. The boys' waywardness comes to a head:

They drifted around from job to job. We, who had cast out their mother because of them, could we take them in? They answered black and white folks by shooting up two men and leaving town. "Godam the white folks; godam the niggers," they shouted as they left town (11).

Like their mother, the young men trouble the townspeople's conscience. Identifying himself with the townspeople through his use of "we," the narrator suggests that they are responsible for the boys' development. The boys, themselves, put the blame on the community when, after the shooting, they leave, cursing both whites and blacks. Their wildness has grown in part out of their social isolation, but also out of the spiritual isolation that comes from being denied an identity. In their parting words, they reveal their own awareness of having been denied even the ambiguous benefits of racial identity. Cut off from society and its values, they become genuinely existential beings faced

---

<sup>13</sup>Blake, 519, has a perceptive discussion of the emerging narrator. She points out that the narrator adopts various poses in the stories, beginning with "Becky," where he is a "bumbling innocent."

with the necessity of creating their own values. These are the representative sons of the South who, alienated from their racial ties, wander in the North, seeking their ancestral roots--"Deep-rooted cane."

And Becky? As the white woman who has thrown the traditional racial values out of balance, Becky is no longer judged by the community:

Smoke curled up from her chimney; she must be there. Trains passing shook the ground. The ground shook the leaning chimney. Nobody noticed it. A creepy feeling came over all who saw that thin wraith of smoke and felt the trembling of the ground. Folks began to take her food again. They quit it soon because they had a fear. Becky if dead might be a hant, and if alive--it took some nerve even to mention it. . . O pines, whisper to Jesus. . . (11).

The allusion to smoke-wraith of "Karintha" becomes explicit. The chimney now serves its function. But it is a supernatural function. The smoke, giving evidence of Becky's presence, becomes increasingly hard to explain as due to natural causes. And the chimney's instability becomes a matter of unconscious perception: the townspeople apparently notice something, for the narrator, as spokesman for them, notices the shaking ground and the leaning chimney. But their perception is revealed only in the "creepy feeling" of those who saw the smoke and felt the vibrations. Their belated contributions of food do nothing to allay their dread, and the absurdity of trying to feed a ghost begins to work in their imagination. Their invocation to the pines to "whisper to Jesus" takes on a desperate quality.

The final episode coordinates the note of superstitious dread and the narrator's identification with the townspeople:



It was Sunday. Our congregation had been visiting at Pulverton, and were coming home. There was no wind. The autumn sun, the bell from Ebenezer Church, listless and heavy. Even the pines were stale, sticky, like the smell of food that makes you sick. Before we turned the bend of the road that would show us the Becky cabin, the horses stopped stock-still, pushed back their ears, and nervously whinnied. We urged, then whipped them on. Quarter of a mile away thin smoke curled up from the leaning chimney. . . O pines, whisper to Jesus. . . Goose-flesh came on my skin though there still was neither chill nor wind. Eyes left their sockets for the cabin. Ears burned and throbbed. Uncanny eclipse! fear closed my mind. We were just about to pass. . . Pines shout to Jesus! . . the ground trembled as a ghost train rumbled by. The chimney fell into the cabin (11-12).

The identification of the narrator is so complete that he adopts some of the townspeople's unsophisticated attitudes. He is no longer a background figure metaphorically synthesizing the southern milieu in a sophisticated poet's vocabulary.<sup>14</sup> He is a mere human being trembling before the unknown. But the effect of the passage is carefully calculated. The evocation of the haunted atmosphere, punctuated by apostrophes to the pines, has something of the quality of a sophisticate pretending naiveté. The eclipse of the sense of sight and hearing completes the failure of the mind to comprehend, to figuratively "see," to communicate. The ghostly smoke permeates the atmosphere as the whispered plea to the pines turns into a shout. The collapse of the chimney constructed by the community fulfills the ominous threat:

Its thud was like a hollow report, ages having passed since it went off. Barlo and I were pulled out of our seats. Dragged to the door that had swung open. Through the dust

---

<sup>14</sup>Ibid. Though Blake does not specifically refer to this quality, it fits her estimate of the narrator.

we saw the bricks in a mound upon the floor. Becky, if she was there, lay under them. I thought I heard a groan. Barlo, mumbling something, threw his Bible on the pile (12).

Apparently, the narrator and Barlo are paralyzed both by their fear and the conventional attitudes of the townspeople toward Becky. Neither makes any effort to search for Becky's body and determine whether it was there, or even if she was alive. Thus Becky is buried, inevitably, by the unwitting behavior of the community in which she lived. Her end is as predetermined by social attitudes as Karintha's. Karintha's burial is figurative, the baby's, literal. Becky's burial is literal, her children's, figurative. But the community has destroyed them all. It is especially significant that Karintha buried her baby in the fragmented waste of the forest, and Becky is buried in an unstable human structure. The verbatim repetition of the epigraph starkly contrasts with the emotional involvement of the narrator in his story.

That both "Karintha" and "Becky" should feature literal and symbolic burials, that the black woman should be associated with dusk and the white woman with eclipse, and that the black woman's child should die whereas the white woman's mulatto children should live as outcasts strongly suggest a thematic relationship. But it would be misleading to see the ominous elements in these first two narratives as predominating over the narrator's celebration of the southern milieu. The narrator immerses himself, fascinated, in an atmosphere of mystic beauty. His identification with the blacks in "Becky" heightens that which is further intensified by a romantic horror. Though the thematic

connections suggest that the first two narratives form a pairing after the manner of the poetry, generalizing a theme while four narratives remain in the first part of Cane would be premature.

With "Carma," the narrative mood returns to the high lyricism of "Karintha."<sup>15</sup> The narrator, who has introduced himself in the first person in "Becky," appears again. But this time he adopts the pose of an outsider visiting town. In contrast with his role in "Becky," in which he carefully remains in the background until the climax of the story, here he introduces himself at the beginning and then withdraws into the background as his "crudest melodrama" unfolds. Since Toomer has made no attempt at supplying place names thus far, nor at indicating whether the settings of the first three narratives are the same or simply generalized southern communities, we might suppose that the narrator has left the setting of "Becky." But though he once again appears more sophisticated than he did in that story, his narrative voice is consistent with that of the first two pieces and the poetry.

As with the first two narratives, "Carma" begins with a four-line epigraph:

Wind is in the cane. Come along.  
Cane leaves swaying, rusty with talk.  
Scratching choruses above the guinea's squawk,  
Wind is in the cane. Come along (16).

---

<sup>15</sup>Blake, 519, sees the narrator of "Carma" as a "detached sophisticate." The lyricism certainly indicates his sophistication, but his involvement with Carma, though distant, is not exactly detached or objective, as my discussion of the "prose-poem"--the long digression from Carma's "melodrama"--shows.

The agitated cane in this song focuses attention on its oracular nature. The rustling sound metaphorically plays on the images of drought and the sounds and movements of a guinea hen. The reference to "scratching choruses" picks up the chanting and singing of the black field hands in "Cotton Song" immediately preceding this sketch and prefigures, ironically, the transformation in "Georgia Dusk." The hen in the cane also foreshadows Carma's actions in a naturalistic way.

The narrative itself begins with a striding image that instantly catches the aggressive character of Carma: "Carma, in overalls, and strong as any man, stands behind the old brown mule, driving the wagon home" (16). Her stance is almost arrogant in its mastery of the mule and the crude vehicle that "bumps, and groans, and shakes as it crosses the railroad track" (16). The narrator, drawn by the sight, leaves a group of men gathered around a stove to follow her progress down the road with his eyes. He notices the red dust of the road, an image first introduced in "Karintha," and dwells on references to eyes and to seeing:

Nigger woman driving a Georgia chariot down an old dust road. Dixie Pike is what they call it. Maybe she feels my gaze, perhaps she expects it. Anyway, she turns. The sun, which has been slanting over her shoulder, shoots primitive rockets into her mangrove-gloomed, yellow flower face. Hi! Yip! God has left the Moses-people for the nigger. "Gedap." Using reins to slap the mule, she disappears in a cloudy rumble at some indefinite point along the road (16).

The perceptions of the narrator dominate over the description of Carma and her progress through the street. They shift from ironic overstatement to that mingling of religious awe and sensuality that reaches

its fullest expression in "Georgia Dusk." The allusion to that mingling here, only fleetingly anticipates it. The juxtaposition of "nigger woman" and "Georgia chariot" transforms the "old dust road" into the "Dixie Pike" in the narrator's imagination, and evokes the African origins from the rural South. Carma begins to emerge as some crude, primitive goddess demanding homage. The shadowy mangrove thicket illuminated by brilliant shafts of sunlight and the "yellow flower face" suggest a woman of mixed ancestry, a hybrid goddess. This suggestion is intensified by the narrator's reference to God's having left "the Moses-people for the nigger." Figuratively, the narrator grafts the Jewish tradition onto the Negro, prefiguring the character "Fern." Thus the narrator suggests that Carma has an aura reminiscent of the myths of antiquity, but also the vitality and strength that might have enabled her to produce a Moses to lead her people out of bondage. This equation of primitive vitality with a messianic leader builds on the ill-fated children of "Karintha" and "Becky."

In its first explicit appearance, the messianic implications barely register in the narrator's imagination. Carma disappears in a "cloudy rumble," a fitting exit for a goddess. But following the images of dust and invisibility in "Karintha" and "Becky," that "cloudy rumble" recalls the infant's burial and the wraiths of pine smoke. The ambiguity of this image does not linger, for the narrator immediately breaks into a parenthetical apotheosis celebrating his newly-discovered "goddess":

(The sun is hammered to a band of gold. Pine-needles, like mazda, are brilliantly aglow. No rain has come to take the rustle from the falling sweet-gum leaves (17).

The parenthesis introduces a long prose-poem interrupting Carma's story. The narrator sets his vision in terms suggesting dusk and autumn, continuing the images of westering and ripeness incipient of decay begin in "Karintha." But those talismans of his South, the pine and the sweet gum tree, combine in a pagan celebration rivaling "Georgia Dusk." The sun, metaphorically flattened on the horizon's anvil, becomes an ornament to grace the departed goddess and, simultaneously, sparks the filamentary pine-needles to incandescence. The association of this image with the Zoroastrian god of light, Ahura-Ormazd, readily accords with the narrator's penchant for mysticism. But more, it alludes to the trade-mark of the electric light in common use at the time Cane was composed,<sup>16</sup> and, through that allusion, prefigures the dehumanized woman of "Her Lips Are Copper Wire." Through the sawmill, the commercial railroad, and the electric light, all of which have poetic, mythic counterparts, the narrator evokes the ambiguity of modern black experience in Part I. His evident enchantment with the agrarian images shows an unconscious awareness of intruding urban concerns, and the inchoate search for a messianic figure to metaphorically liberate the black people from this commercialization begins to register in those images.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup>"Mazda" was registered as a trade-mark for light bulbs manufactured by General Electric, May 3, 1910. See the Trade Mark Register of the United States (Washington, D.C.: Patent Search Service, 1975), #77,779.

<sup>17</sup>See the discussion above, Chapter II, p. 26.

The dryness of the "falling sweet-gum leaves" connotes autumnal decline rather than vernal renewal. The narrator may dream of Carma as an Amazon capable of producing a messianic leader, but the image, linked with further references to industrial activities, augurs eclipse and sterility for the woman:

Over in the forest, across the swamp, a sawmill blows its closing whistle. Smoke curls up. Marvelous web spun by the spider sawdust pile. Curls up and spreads itself pine-high above the branch, a single silver band along the eastern valley (17).

Here, as in "Georgia Dusk," evening and the cessation of the sawmill operations coincide to reinforce the image of the Negro's uncertain fate. The smoke of the sawmill, the ominous shade of Karintha's child, haunts the landscape and spins out a web. The sawdust pile itself becomes the spider, and its web, silvery, a pale reduction of the brilliant golden sun, suggests the moon-phase of Negro experience. Significantly, this silvery thread weaves along the "eastern valley," set in opposition to the setting sun. The details are lovingly developed in the narrator's imagination; the images are not coarse or insensitive. They bespeak the narrator's enchantment.

Against this splendorous background, the narrator returns to a human figure:

A black boy . . . you are the most sleepest man I ever seed, Sleeping Beauty . . . cradled on a gray mule, guided by the hollow sound of cowbells, heads for them through a rusty cotton field (17).

Affectionately, the narrator adopts a southern Negro's diction as he refers to the stereotyped lazy "black boy" as "Sleeping Beauty." But the boy is "cradled," and the implied link with the child that might

have been, Karintha's, or Carma's, continues the undercurrent of re-birth. That the boy has, ironically, been enchanted increases the mythic associations in the passage. Then, too, the dialectal use of the word, "seed," may also allude to the "plumseed" of "Song of the Son" which follows "Carma." The subtlety of the pun is entirely in keeping with the self-conscious poetics of the narrator.<sup>18</sup> The connotations of this passage, attended by the aridity of the "rusty cotton field" repeats the theme of racial renewal in an ambiguous context.

The presence of industrial symbols continues to heighten the contrast with the charm of a simpler life:

From down the railroad track, the chug-chug of a gas engine announces that the repair gang is coming home. A girl in the yard of a whitewashed shack not much larger than the stack of worn ties piled before it, sings. Her voice is loud. Echoes, like rain, sweep the valley. Dusk takes the polish from the rails. Lights twinkle in scattered houses. 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 flare . . . juju men, greegree, witch-doctors . . . torches go out. . . The Dixie Pike has grown from a goat path in Africa.

Night.

Foxie, the bitch, slicks back her ears and barks at the rising moon.) (17-18)

This interlude in Carma's story prepares the end literally and figuratively. A girl, who represents the female essence of Carma, and

---

<sup>18</sup>Turner, p. 13, comments on Toomer's sometimes too-subtle satire. See also his "Failure of a Playwright," CLA Journal, 10 (June 1967) 312, cited by Krasny, p. 35.



perhaps all primitive black women, transforms the valley through her magical voice. While the dusk marks the time when the black workmen return home from the demands of an industrialized society, it also signals the imaginative liberation of the primeval black soul. The woman's song, like the choristers' in "Georgia Dusk," brings symbolic rain to fertilize the valley, and her earthiness is conveyed in part by the literal earthiness of the farmyards. Out of this fertility germinates the dream: the primitive beauty of the African forest celebrated by pagan priests. The girl becomes an earth-mother.<sup>19</sup>

But night ends the vision. In the dark, figurative and literal, the bitch emerges: a fox-bitch coquettes at the very symbol of vanity and inconstancy, the moon. And the narrator resumes Carma's "crudest melodrama." The second half of the story begins with terse, simple sentences:

Her husband's in the gang. And its her fault he got there.  
Working with a contractor, he was away most of the time.  
She had others. No one blames her for that. He returned  
one day and hung around the town where he picked up week-  
old boasts and rumors. . . (18)

Here, again, the narrator strongly identifies with the attitudes of the local people. He even tells his story as an unsophisticated storyteller might, revealing its outcome by referring to the husband's imprisonment, then leading up to it again. The narrator does not

---

<sup>19</sup>George C. Matthews, "Toomer's Cane: The Artist and His World," CLA Journal, 17 (June 1974) 549, suggests that Carma is a spirit alienated from her own hostile environment. Chase, 265, and Fischer, 195-96, deal with her earthiness and sensuality.

condemn Carma's infidelity; he has already created an atmosphere in which the woman's behavior is natural and expected.

Indeed, Carma's great strength seems to justify her behavior to everyone but her husband:

Bane accused her. She denied. He couldnt see that she was becoming hysterical. He would have liked to take his fists and beat her. Who was strong as a man. Stronger. Words, like corkscrews, wormed to her strength. It fizzled out. Grabbing a gun, she rushed from the house and plunged across the road into a cane-brake. . There, in quarter heaven shone the crescent moon. . . (18-19)

The husband's name, Bane, denotes his role even as he enacts it. But of greater importance is Carma's behavior when she is confronted by her husband. Carma is a being of action, not of words, and when her husband's "words, like corkscrews, wormed to her strength," she seizes a gun and runs out to do something desperate. That she rushes into a cane-brake, with its overtones of symbolic black experience, adds significance to her defiant gesture: unlike the fox-bitch, Carma is not really free to slick back her ears and bark at the moon. Furthermore, not the full moon of potent spells lights her way, but the quarter moon of waning power and the quadroon of racial dilution. Carma's gun barks out her futile expression.

Bane's subsequent behavior shows that he is no match for Carma. The cunning vixen's primitive instincts terrify her mate. He knows that he must pursue, but he fears a trick. He deliberately wastes time gathering a group of men to search for her, thinking that "she might still be live enough to shoot" (10). Carma's "tracks dissolving in the loose earth about the cane" draws together the idea

that "time and space have no meaning in a canefield" and symbolically conveys Carma's desire to escape the logic of an intolerable present by flight to an irrational, mythic past. The footprints dissolving in loose earth remind us that the canefield of the epigraph is arid, "rusty," and that the potential for fertility and renewal spun out in the symbolic woman of the narrator's dream-interlude is thwarted in Carma. One of the men stumbles over her body and she is carried back through the cane:

From the road, one would have thought that they were cornering a rabbit or a skunk. . . It is difficult carrying dead weight through cane (19).

The activity of the men thrashing around in the cane suggests an animal hunt to the narrator and continues his motif of the natural and the wild. The difficulty experienced by the men in carrying Carma's body through the cane indicates that they are not only encumbered with the weight and hindered by the stalks, but are metaphorically encumbered as well. Their burden subtly foreshadows the dead weight carried by "Rhobert." When Carma has been laid on a sofa and "a curious, nosey somebody looked for the wound," her deception is revealed.<sup>20</sup> Like Rhobert, Carma makes elaborate gestures that are ultimately futile. Her eyes, so "weak and pitiable for so strong a woman," fail to work their feminine appeal on Bane: "His head went off. Slashed one of the men who'd helped, the man who'd stumbled

---

<sup>20</sup>Krasny, p. 55, says that Carma is aroused by the investigation for the wound, and suggests that that is why Bane explodes.

over her. Now he's in the gang. Who was her husband. Should she not take others, this Carma, strong as a man, whose tale as I have told it is the crudest melodrama?" (19-20) As with "Karintha" and "Becky," the epigraph serves as epilogue. The proud, even haughty goddess of the narrator's first encounter is reduced to the pathetic victim of forces beyond her ken or control.

The narrator's role as an outsider being initiated into the mysteries of the South leads directly to the central theme of Part I: the narrator's identity as a "son" returning to his origins. When that idea is placed next to the stunted development of the children emerging from the southern milieu, however, the initiation has ominous implications. Since the narrator has not yet fully realized the significance of what is being unfolded in the prose and poetry of the first two parts of Cane, his affirmation in "Song of the Son" and "Georgia Dusk" is still tentative.

In "Fern," the narrator, once again an outsider, emerges as a full-fledged character in his own story. Narrated in the first person, as was "Carma," "Fern" deals with his initiation into the mysteries of the southern woman whose name supplies the title. As previously pointed out, all of the narratives up to this point really concern the persona's perceptions and use the women themselves as imaginative vehicles for those perceptions. The epigraphs and epilogues enhance the illusion of folk tale, even when the narrator himself

appears in the stories. In "Fern," he omits the epigraph, but he begins with a descriptive passage that suggests that Fern is a being about whom folk tales are made:<sup>21</sup>

Face flowed into her eyes. Flowed in soft cream foam and plaintive ripples, in such a way that wherever your glance may momentarily have rested it immediately thereafter wavered in the direction of her eyes. The soft suggestion of down slightly darkened, like the shadow of a bird's wing might, the creamy brown color of her upper lip. Why, after noticing it, you sought her eyes, I cannot tell you. Her nose was aquiline, Semitic. If you have heard a Jewish cantor sing, if he has touched you and made your sorrow seem trivial when compared to his, you will know my feeling when I follow the curves of her profile, like mobile rivers, to their common delta (24).

This description, less condensed than that of Karintha, or Becky, or Carma, is no less mythic. Each detail creates an impression of movement. As in "Face," Fern's features flow like a river or system of rivers: "cream foam," "plaintive ripples," and "common delta." The tragic implications of the poem are not as explicit here, but the association of the images carries some of its tone. The reference to the Semitic cast of Fern's features reinforces that tragic quality through association with the Jews' history, and again the narrator reminds us that "God has left the Moses-people for the nigger" (16) as in "Carma."<sup>22</sup> The bird-like whir of Karintha becomes

---

<sup>21</sup>Marian Stein, "The Poet-Observer and Fern in Jean Toomer's Cane," Markham Review, 2 (October 1970) 64-65, Rafael A. Cancel, "Male and Female Interrelationships in Toomer's Cane," Negro American Literature Forum, 5 (Spring 1971) 27, and Blake, 521-22, comment on Fern's exotic, mysterious nature. Reilly, 317, sees her as the climactic instinctual female. Hargis Westerfield, "Jean Toomer's 'Fern': A Mythical Dimension," CLA Journal, 14 (March 1971) 274, sees Fern as a "Jewish Mother of God."

<sup>22</sup>Westerfield, 274, suggests that Fern's Jewishness is an important indicator of her mythic function as "Madonna."

a "suggestion of down" and shadow playing about Fern's mouth. The eyes, with their haunting quality, recall both Becky and Carma. Thus Fern becomes a composite of elements in the other women of Cane, of natural and ethnic forces.

Having noted the compelling quality of Fern's eyes, the narrator speculates on the nature of eyes in women, and invites the reader to share his experience in the manner of a Sherwood Anderson naif:<sup>23</sup>

They were strange eyes. In this, that they sought nothing--that is, nothing that was obvious and tangible and that one could see, and they gave the impression that nothing was to be denied. When a woman seeks, you will have observed, her eyes deny. Fern's eyes desired nothing that you could give her; there was no reason why they should withhold. Men saw her eyes and fooled themselves. Fern's eyes said to them that she was easy. When she was young, a few men took her, but got no joy from it. And then, once done, they felt bound to her (quite unlike their hit and run with other girls), felt it would take them a lifetime to fulfill an obligation which they could find no name for. They became attached to her, and hungered after finding the barest trace of what she might desire (24-25).

But though he is baffled by Fern's eyes, the narrator makes it clear that their mystery goes beyond female psychology. Experience of the world does not prepare one for these eyes. The fascination of this woman goes beyond experience. And though the locus of fascination differs from Karintha's, the men respond in an identical way--at

---

<sup>23</sup>The naive narrator, a favorite device of Anderson's, was no doubt suggested to Toomer by the older man's work. His Autobiography, Toomer Collection, Fisk University, Box 14, File 1, p. 55, and his letters to Sherwood Anderson, Box 1, File 1 show that he knew his work well. Dillard, p. 51, Stein, 64, Fischer, 197-98, and Blake, 521, all discuss the "implicated reader."

least, as the narrator perceives that response. Yet his probing into the mythos of the eyes draws the narrator deeper into his subject: men are fascinated by woman's vision, thinking that it reflects their desire. In the case of special women like Karintha or Fern, they misunderstand that vision. When they learn their error, they are awed and obligated in some ineffable way.

At first, their awe takes the form of adolescent fantasies:

Men were everlastingly bringing her their bodies. Something inside of her got tired of them, I guess, for I am certain that for the life of her she could not tell why or how she began to turn them off. A man in fever is no trifling thing to send away. They began to leave her, baffled and ashamed, yet vowing to themselves that some day they would do some fine thing for her: send her candy every week and not let her know whom it came from, watch out for her wedding-day and give her a magnificent something with no name on it, buy a house and deed it to her, rescue her from some unworthy fellow who had tricked her into marrying him (25-26).

The range and diversity of these schemes seems to be out of all proportion to the cause. They serve to emphasize the overwhelming effect of Fern's inward-turning vision and set the tone of the men's responses. By degrees, the awe turns into worship:

As you know, men are apt to idolize or fear that which they cannot understand, especially if it be a woman. She did not deny them, yet the fact was that they were denied. 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. Now a virgin in a small southern town is by no means the usual thing, if you will believe me (26).

By a similar twist of metaphoric logic, Fern, like the "cornfield concubines" in "Georgia Dusk," becomes the town virgin. She is elevated to the station of a goddess out of a mixture of superstition and guilt. When these factors are added to the metaphoric and thematic

context of the poetry and the preceding sketches of women, their narrative impact gathers more strongly: The women show the degeneration of the black race under the influence of the white, and the men respond with an inchoate yearning for some regenerating influence. Neither the women nor the men fully perceive the emerging pattern; the men, in fact, misperceive it.

The emerging pattern is further complicated by the narrator's identification with the southern men. Since "Fern" follows the affirmations of "Song of the Son" and "Georgia Dusk," the narrator quite logically shares the local awe inspired by the woman. But because he is an outsider, a northern black, the narrator's identification is incomplete. That fact enables him to place the southern black feeling for Fern into a metaphoric perspective, but not entirely to penetrate it. So, what he perceives becomes his own imaginative projection. He brings his story's introduction to a close with a statement of insight that, however, subsequently appears to be misleading:

That the sexes were made to mate is the practice of the South. Particularly, black folks were made to mate. And it is black folks whom I have been talking about thus far. What white men thought of Fern I can arrive at only by analogy. They let her alone (26).

The narrator speaks with some assurance of southern black attitudes, which, together with his expressed awe of Fern at the beginning of the story, seems to tighten his identification with those attitudes, but as the narrative continues, the distance between the speaker and the townspeople becomes apparent. As in the previous sketches, the narrator uses a woman as a means of evoking the lyrical atmosphere out of which his ethnic vision materializes:



Anyone, of course could see her, could see her eyes. If you walked up the Dixie Pike most any time of day, you'd be most like to see her resting listless-like on the railing of her porch, back propped against a post, head tilted a little forward because there was a nail in the porch post just where her head came which for some reason or other she never took the trouble to pull out. Her eyes, if it were sunset, rested idly where the sun, molten and glorious, was pouring down between the fringe of pines. Or maybe they gazed at the gray cabin on the knoll from which an evening folk-song was coming. Perhaps they followed a cow that had been turned loose to roam and feed on cotton-stalks and corn leaves. Like as not they'd settle on some vague spot above the horizon, though hardly a trace of wistfulness would come to them. If it were dusk, they'd wait for the search-light of the evening train which you could see miles up the track before it flared across the Dixie Pike, close to her home. Wherever they looked, you'd follow them and then waver back. Like her face, the whole countryside seemed to flow into her eyes. Flowed into them with the soft listless cadence of Georgia's South (26-27).

Vision dominates the scene. Fern's visibility itself becomes a vantage from which to see. Her attitude toward the landscape and to her own position in it, like her attitude toward the men who sought her body, communicates indifference. The nail in the post against which she might otherwise lean her head does not visibly trouble her, though it troubles the narrator.<sup>24</sup> The "molten and glorious" sun apparently means no more to her than the aimless ramblings of a cow. Neither the horizon nor the keen, penetrating light of the locomotive, images that evoke vague longings in the narrator and ultimately have deep significance for him, moves her. Her gaze compels the viewer to follow it, but the effect of looking pales beside the

---

<sup>24</sup>Westerfield, 276, says that the nail commemorates Jesus' crucifixion. Actually, it does more than that. See below, Chapter V, p. 279.

mystery of Fern's emptiness and draws the viewer back. Her eyes are a vast, metaphoric vortex drawing everything into them, but even this inward-flowing vision moves "with the soft listless cadence of Georgia's South."

Although the narrator, in his description of Fern, tries to get nearer to his subject by adopting colloquialisms, e.g., "most like," "like as not," "listless-like," his diction is generally sophisticated. His use of subjunctive mood, as in "her eyes, if it were sunset . . . ," "shows a polish unlikely in casual usage, and such phrases as "hardly a trace of wistfulness" or "the soft listless cadence" reveal the cultivated usage of the poet. These elements do not jar against the verbal texture because they successfully blend deceptively simple phrases with genuinely simple words in a subtly metaphoric context. The narrator seldom uses words of more than two syllables, and when he does, they are usually familiar and unpretentious. Yet his metaphoric intent completely blends his northern impatience over the southern lack of purpose with his human appreciation of natural beauty and his concern that so-called progress is ruining it. His use of language, literally and figuratively, foreshadows his reception by the townspeople:

I first saw her on her porch. I was passing with a fellow whose crusty numbness (I was from the North and suspected of being prejudiced and stuck-up) was melting as he found me warm (27-28).

The southern blacks view the narrator with suspicion, though he is able to relate to them individually and draw a limited respect.

When he first sees Fern, his curiosity about her draws a laconic reply:

"That's Fern," was all that I could get from him. Some folks already thought that I was given to nosing around; I let it go at that, so far as questions were concerned (28).

He has learned to exercise some care about the local taboos, but he makes it clear that, though his verbal inquiries may be thwarted, he will pursue his inquiries another way.

The narrator's determination to get closer to Fern, to penetrate her mystery, is a specific instance of the general response which the narrator ascribes to the men of the town:

. . . at first sight of her I felt as if I heard a Jewish cantor sing. As if his singing rose above the unheard chorus of a folk-song. And I felt bound to her. I too had my dreams: something I would do for her (28).

The black women of the South, and especially Fern, serve as a metaphor by which the narrator tries to overcome his sense of alienation from black culture. They are at the heart of his affirmations. The source of his lyricism, the means of clinging to the vestiges of a tradition which his perceptions hint are past recall though those perceptions are fully conscious to him. His altruistic desire to do something for Fern is bound up with this submerged motivation. Moreover, by forming that metaphor in images of the natural and the artificial, the agrarian and the urban, and increasingly focusing these in the Negro and the Jew, he builds in associations with the classic Judeo-Christian myths: a lost paradise, a promised land, a Messiah, a miraculous birth to renew the race.

Such myths also carry a hidden freight of guilt, expressed in the narrator's perception of obligation and awe in the presence of

women, and even of woman defiled. How shall the narrator expiate such a sense of guilt, a guilt so imperfectly realized that he can only grasp it metaphorically? He speculates whether a change of place or an enlargement of horizons--complementary aims--would most benefit Fern, but he rejects these alternatives as inclining more to her corruption (28-29). He considers "the futility of mere change of place" (28) as a solution to inner problems: the greater alienation of the North (28), the relative unimportance of affluence in love (28), and the danger that Fern might become "out and out a prostitute along State Street in Chicago" or some similar urban environment (29). The narrator even reveals his own considerable ego and confusion:

Something I must do for her. There was myself. What could I do for her? Talk, of course. Push back the fringe of pines upon new horizons. To what purpose? and what for? Her? myself? Men in her case seem to lose their selfishness. I lost mine before I touched her. I ask you, friend (it makes no difference if you sit in the Pullman or the Jim Crow as the train crosses her road), what thoughts would come to you--that is, after you'd finished with the thoughts that leap into men's minds at the sight of a pretty woman who will not deny them; what thoughts would come to you, had you seen her in a quick flash, keen and intuitively, as she sat there on her porch when your train thundered by? (29)

As with other men, his first thought is to offer Fern himself, but then he confidently states that through his talk alone he could enlarge her view of the world. His motive is not entirely self-centered, for he immediately expresses doubt about his larger motivation. Yet he continues to desire Fern. Here, all men of any sensitivity would be equally naive. So the pose of naif at the beginning of the story is not that of an inexperienced, unsophisticated

man. The narrator asks a question that goes beyond what sophisticated men understand. He poses the riddle of the black woman: how to complete what is incomplete, how to restore what is lost.

Fumbling, the narrator approaches Fern directly:

One evening I walked up the Pike on purpose, and stopped to say hello. Some of her family were about, but they moved away to make room for me. Damn if I knew how to begin. Would you? Mr. and Miss So-and-So, people, the weather, the crops, the new preacher, the frolic, the church benefit, . . . to all these things she gave a yassur or nassur, without further comment (30).

The man who confidently asserted that he could push back horizons with talk is here at a loss for words. In desperation, he suggests that Fern and he go for a walk. The sexual implications of their going off together occur to him, and, significantly, he reassures Fern with his eyes:

Something told me that men before me had said just that as a prelude to the offering of their bodies. I tried to tell her with my eyes. I think she understood. The thing from her that made my throat catch, vanished. Its passing left her visible in a way I'd thought, but never seen. We walked down the Pike with people on all the porches gaping at us (30-31).

The eyes, the primary organs through which the elaborate imagery of the poetry and the prose of Cane is perceived, become the means of communication between Fern and the narrator after words fail. Even the townspeople participate in this visual communication. And because such communication seems more direct than words, the narrator seems to think that it is also more exact. In the light of "Prayer," however, where seeing is as much a source of confusion as other communications--indeed, the narrator cites it as the source of confusion--the present unspoken understanding becomes ironic.

This ironic seeing leads to the climactic revelation of the story. The unspoken understanding loosens Fern's reserve enough for the woman to speak:

"Doesnt it make you mad?" She meant the row of petty gossiping people. She meant the world (31).

The words are few, but they show the woman reaching out. And since she and the narrator seem to agree that the world of convention and pettiness intrude on their soul-searching, they withdraw further:

Through a canebrake that was ripe for cutting, the branch was reached. Under a sweet-gum tree, and where reddish leaves had dammed the creek a little, we sat down. Dusk, suggesting the almost imperceptible procession of giant trees, settled with a purple haze about the cane (31).

Once more, the canefield becomes a timeless cocoon of purple dusk insulated from the world of commerce and industry. Here in this dream-world, the narrator is filled with fantasies. The trees, lost in the dusk, seem to be part of some grand spectacle:

I felt strange, as I always do in Georgia, particularly at dusk. I felt that things unseen to men were tangibly immediate. It would not have surprised me had I had vision. People have them in Georgia more often than you would suppose. A black woman once saw the mother of Christ and drew her in charcoal on the courthouse wall. . . . When one is on the soil of one's ancestors, most anything can come to one. . . . (31).

The dream world becomes a metaphor of the narrator's racial affirmation. Georgia, dusk, and vision, these intertwine in his imagination and recall a woman's vision of a black Christ. It is especially significant that the narrator, a man given to metaphoric seeing, does not himself

have a vision.<sup>25</sup> The lapse foreshadows his failure of vision at the end of the poetry in Part II.

It also precipitates a blunder. Unthinkingly, he embraces Fern:

From force of habit, I suppose, I held Fern in my arms--that is, without at first noticing it. Then my mind came back to her. Her eyes, unusually weird and open, held me. Held God. He flowed in as I've seen the countryside flow in. Seen men (31-32).

The narrator almost has a vision. He can only repeat the metaphoric vortex in Fern's eyes, now more intense than ever. It is Fern who seems to have the vision, for her eyes "held God." Her subsequent behavior can only be described by the narrator, for he does not quite understand what is happening to her:

I must have done something--what, I don't know, in the confusion of my emotion. She sprang up. Rushed some distance from me. Fell to her knees, and began swaying, swaying. Her body was

---

<sup>25</sup> Alice Poindexter Fisher, "The Influence of Ouspensky's *Tertium Organum* upon Jean Toomer's *Cane*," *CLA Journal*, 17 (June 1974) 511, argues that the narrator's omission of the article, "a," before the word, "vision," refers not to a supernatural image, but to an "insight into the order of the universe." Apparently, she means that the narrator has an intuitive grasp of a truth without an attendant image, a significant departure from Toomer's method. Actually, Fisher takes her quote out of an important context: the following line reads, "People have them more often. . .," *Cane*, p. 31. Unless the narrator means "vision," there is no antecedent for "them." Either the narrator uses "them" colloquially to refer to a singular noun, or the noun should read, "visions." The omission of the article, "a," or the terminal, "s," is not at all unlikely, for there are numerous typographical errors, misprints, and other anomalies mechanical inherent in the original edition of the book. An interesting silent emendation occurs in Todd Lieber's "Design and Movement in *Cane*," *CLA Journal*, 13 (September 1969) 41: the missing "a" is interpolated and the incongruity of the plural pronoun avoided by omission.

tortured with something it could not let out. Like boiling sap it flooded arms and fingers till she shook them as if they burned her. It found her throat, and spattered inarticulately in plaintive, convulsive sounds, mingled with calls to Christ Jesus. And then she sang, brokenly. A child's voice, uncertain, or an old man's. Dusk hid her; I could hear only her song. It seemed to be as though she were pounding her head in anguish upon the ground. I rushed to her. She fainted in my arms (32).

What could precipitate such a response? The narrator suggests that either the gesture of putting his arms around Fern, or some unconscious subsequent action, brought about the outburst. But this woman has passively accepted men, or as passively has turned them away. Her anguish and her barely coherent appeals to Jesus are out of all proportion to anything physical the narrator may have done. Perhaps the key is in the unusually "weird and open" quality of Fern's eyes as she looks into the narrator's. Somehow, he seems to have communicated his fantasy of Georgia and dusk and the mother of Christ, the images in his mind at the moment he looks into Fern's eyes. The incident grows out of his earlier visual communication with Fern. The communication is faulty; it terrifies Fern, rather than drawing her closer to him. Perhaps what is most likely to terrify Fern is the narrator's own perception of her. The confusion of the narrator's inner state would not selectively eliminate images and ideas that might prove damaging to her. The terrible emptiness which the narrator imagines, the inchoate yearning to regenerate the black race, and the failure built into his perceptions unawares, these, perceived by Fern, would explain why she seems to fill with boiling sap.



Whatever Fern sees in his eyes, the narrator continues to translate her responses into his well-established images. He, himself, does not grasp them fully, and the response of the townsmen to rumors of the incident effectively prevents the narrator's further attempts to understand what happened:

. . . I got one or two ugly looks from town men who'd set themselves up to protect her. In fact, there was talk of making me leave town. But they never did. They kept a watch-out for me, though. Shortly after, I came back North (32-33).

The narrator's last glimpse of Fern comes appropriately as his train passes her house. He sees her as he first saw her:

. . . head tilted a little forward where the nail was, eyes vaguely focused on the sunset. Saw her face flow into them, the countryside and something that I called God, flowing into them. . . Nothing ever really happened. Nothing ever came to Fern, not even I. Something I would do for her. Some fine unnamed thing. . . And, friend, you? She is still living, I have reason to know. Her name, against the chance that you might happen down that way, is Fernie May Rosen (33).

The narrator says that "nothing really happened." His sketch of Fern at the end of the story reads almost exactly as several of his earlier references to her. These last words sum up the principal images of the story. The addition of the woman's full name, revealing her actual Jewish ancestry,<sup>26</sup> emphasizes the special anguish of a human being produced by two outcast peoples, but it also stresses the narrator's imaginative assertion in "Carma," that "God has left the Moses-people for the nigger."

---

<sup>26</sup>Stein, 65, says her Jewish name is irrelevant, which led to Westerfield's rebuttal, 274.

Though "Carma" and "Fern" share certain features that suggest a thematic pairing--they flank the affirmations of "Song of the Son" and "Georgia Dusk," they draw increasing attention to the narrator, and they link the Negro with the Jew in a messianic myth--"Fern" is the more significant story. If the central theme of the narratives of Part I follows the pattern of the poetry--and so far, it does--then the emergence of the narrator as a major character in "Fern" develops that theme more fully than the first three sketches. The black poet returning to his native soil to affirm and celebrate his racial heritage is subordinated in the narratives to the women of his mythic landscape. "Fern" begins to clarify the symbolic importance of the women in that landscape. The story also redoubles the downward trend of the poems following "Georgia Dusk," for the narrator, having affirmed his racial ties with the South, cannot make them work in his relations with human beings.

That the narrator returns North at the end of "Fern," baffled and frustrated in his attempt to impart his incomplete vision of the South, throws the remaining two stories, "Esther" and "Blood-Burning Moon," into special relief. They hang in the narrator's imagination like the pine-smoke wraiths of the earlier sketches. Since the narrator does not directly participate in these final stories, their mythic qualities are enhanced.

The four days spread out over eighteen years that make up the three parts of "Esther"<sup>27</sup> highlight the fragmentation of southern

---

<sup>27</sup>Turner, p. 18.

blacks, once again. They also recall the element of counting in "Karintha," where "young men . . . thought that all they had to do was count time" (3-4) before they could mate with a desirable woman. In "Esther," however, this element is trenchantly ironic. Nor does Esther's ironic parallel with Karintha end there. Karintha appears in brilliant, if slightly malevolent, flashes, full of life and color and movement. Esther is more fully revealed, but she is a pale reflection of Karintha. At nine,

Esther's hair falls in soft curls about her high-cheek-boned chalk-white face. Esther's hair would be beautiful if there were more gloss to it. And if her face were not prematurely serious, one would call it pretty. Her cheeks are too flat and dead for a girl of nine (36).

The narrator's judgments still infuse his descriptions. Esther appears drab and colorless. Karintha's behavior was wild and animalistic, her morality at best a stunted, deformed kind of middle-class values. Esther looks and behaves

. . . like a little white child, starched, frilled, as she walks slowly from her home towards her father's grocery store (36).

Esther is indeed middle-class, and as close to being white as a Negro can be. Karintha, even as a child, drew men to her. Esther is ignored:

She is about to turn in Broad from Maple Street. White and black men loafing on the corner hold no interest for her (36).

Thus the imagery conveying Esther contrasts with that of Karintha, carrying out the narrator's scheme of sunset and dusk fading into moonlight and night revealed in the poetry: the brilliance of Karintha and the paleness of Esther.

The first part of "Esther" introduces this drab little girl and prepares a new twist in the motif of vision:

Then a strange thing happens. A clean-muscled, magnificent, black-skinned Negro, whom she had heard her father mention as King Barlo, suddenly drops to his knees on a spot called the Spittoon. White men, unaware of him, continue squirting tobacco juice in his direction. The saffron fluid splashes on his face. His smooth black face begins to glisten and to shine. Soon, people notice him, and gather round. His eyes are rapturous upon the heavens. Lips and nostrils quiver. Barlo is in a religious trance (36-37).

Barlo, the preacher who threw his Bible onto Becky's mound, here becomes King Barlo, a person of veneration.<sup>28</sup> The veneration, in this case, mocks and parodies the veneration of the women in the earlier stories. In the image of the spitting men, the narrator evokes the Passion of Jesus on the eve of his crucifixion. And in that both black and white men spit on Barlo, the narrative adds another parallel with Jesus and prophets generally: the person of vision is betrayed by his own people as they are themselves oppressed.

When the men realize what they are doing and that Barlo is lost in religious ecstasy, they gather around him. With exquisite restraint, the narrator presents a picture that is almost grotesquely comic:

---

<sup>28</sup>Barlo is usually interpreted as an archetypal black. Dillard, p. 56, sees him as a symbol of the Negro past. Fischer, 198, Innes, 310, and Krasny, pp. 58-59, tend to place Barlo in the same light, with slight variations. Duncan, 328, connects him with Tom Burwell of "Blood-Burning Moon." Only Edward E. Waldron, "The Search for Identity in Jean Toomer's 'Esther,'" CLA Journal, 14 (March 1971) 278, seems to recognize his "vulgar reality," though he does not, apparently, see it as satire.

Barlo is in a religious trance. Town folks know it. They are not afraid. They gather round. Some beg boxes from the grocery stores. From old McGregor's notion shop. A coffin-case is pressed into use. Folks line the curb-stones. Business men close shop. And Banker Warply parks his car close by. Silently, all await the prophet's voice. The sheriff, a great florid fellow whose leggings never meet around his bulging calves, swears in three deputies. "Wall, y cant never tell what a nigger like King Barlo might be up t." Soda bottles, five fingers full of shine, are passed to those who want them. A couple of stray dogs start a fight. Old Goodlow's cow comes flopping up the street. Barlo, still as an Indian fakir, has not moved. The town bell strikes six. The sun slips in behind a heavy mass of horizon cloud. The crowd is hushed and expectant (37).

The mixture of plausible verisimilitude and arch stereotypes creates a satire<sup>29</sup> of the folk sermon foreshadowing the degeneracy of "Conversion." The perfunctory way in which the crowd behaves, the almost exaggerated solemnity, the ironic allusion to the feeding of the multitudes at the Sermon on the Mount, juxtaposed with the comic irrelevance of the sheriff, the rowdy dogs, and the aimless cow almost upset the balance of the scene and threaten to turn it into out and out farce. Even the disappearance of the sun, at this crucial moment, though fitting the prevailing imagery of the poetry and the narratives, seems too contrived to be believed. Given the absence of the narrator from the scene, the sharp down-turning in the theme of affirmation, and the sardonic commentary on Negro folk preachers in "Conversion" which follows "Esther," the satiric point of this scene is unmistakable.

---

<sup>29</sup>Turner, 13. See 18n above.

The tone of this setting colors Barlo's utterances, when they come:

Barlo's under jaw relaxes, and his lips begin to move.

"Jesus has been awhisperin strange words deep down, O way down deep, deep in my ears."

Hums of awe and of excitement.

"He called me to His side an said, 'Git down on your knees beside me, son, Ise gwine t whisper in your ears.'"

An old sister cries, "Ah, Lord."

"'Ise agwine t whisper in your ears,' he said, an I replied, 'Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.'"

"Ah, Lord. Amen. Amen" (38).

Barlo, at first, says little, though his audience responds fervently.

He appears to be a quack, his audience gullible. But as he goes on,

his words take on a double significance:

"An He said, 'Tell em till you feel your throat on fire.' I saw a vision. 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 in th clouds. An while he was agazin at th heavens, heart filled up with th Lord, some little white-ant biddies came an tied his feet to chains. They led him t th coast, they led him t th sea, they led him across th ocean an they didnt set him free. The old coast didnt miss him, an th new coast wasnt free, he left the old-coast brothers, t give birth t you an me. O Lord, great God Almighty, t give birth t you an me" (38-39).

Barlo states the obvious. On one level his oratory indulges in cheap effects: the magnificence of the black man, the insignificance of the white; the singsong quality of his phrases; the slogans of oppression and freedom; and the refrain-like conclusion of the first part of his speech, creating the effect of a stanza in a hymn. On another level, Barlo strikes a note very near to that sounded by the narrator in his affirmations in "Song of the Son" and "Georgia Dusk." The religious ecstasy, perhaps feigned in Barlo's case, the conversion

of African spirit into Christian, these were very real components of the narrator's revelations. Barlo seems to illustrate that truth, when emerging from the mouths of charlatans, can have a very false ring. The narrator, however, does not overtly allow his reservations about Barlo to appear in his story. If Barlo is a charlatan, he is an admirable one. The narrator may elsewhere express disapproval, but here he dwells on Barlo's positive qualities.

The crowd is deeply moved by his eloquence: "Old gray mothers are in tears. Fragments of melodies are being hummed. White folks are touched and curiously awed" (39). But the preachers of both races conspire to get rid of Barlo. Their jealousy again recalls the conspiracy of the chief priests and scribes against Jesus. The ironic mixture of cheap sentimentality and genuine inspiration continues:

Barlo looks as though he is struggling to continue. People are hushed. One can hear weevils work. Dusk is falling rapidly, and the customary store lights fail to throw their feeble glow across the gray dust and flagging of the Georgia town. Barlo rises to his full height. He is immense. To the people he assumes the outlines of his visioned African. In a mighty voice he bellows:

"Brothers an sisters, turn your faces t th sweet face of the Lord, an fill your hearts with glory. Open your eyes an see th dawnin of th mornin light. Open your ears--" (39)

The reference to weevils working in the hush that precedes Barlo's final outpouring may simply be a local metaphor, but the destructiveness of the pests may be an allusion to the half-comic conspiracy in the background. The metaphoric formula of dusk and Negro magnificence renders Barlo immune, for the moment, to the puny lights of commerce. He triumphantly proclaims a new dawn.

Though couched in satiric, even ambivalent language, this scene shows Barlo enunciating the theme of racial reawakening in a way the narrator, with his northern sophistication,<sup>30</sup> was unable to do. Barlo is a part of the southern black tradition which the narrator responded to so strongly; Barlo personifies its vestigial greatness and its current debasement. But whatever the narrator's final judgment of the Barlos, the point of the episode is its effect on Esther. What would be Barlo's effect on the dreary little nine-year-old daughter of a dreary little shopkeeper? Something of that effect may be gauged from the closing paragraph of the first part:

Years afterwards Esther was told that at that very moment a great, heavy, rumbling voice actually was heard. That hosts of angels and demons paraded up and down the streets all night. That King Barlo rode out of town astride a pitch-black bull that had a glowing gold ring in its nose. And that old Limp Underwood, who hated niggers, woke up next morning to find that he held a black man in his arms. This much is certain: an inspired Negress, of wide reputation for being sanctified, drew a portrait of a black madonna on the courthouse wall. And King Barlo left town. He left his image indelibly upon the mind of Esther. He became the starting point of the only living patterns that her mind was to know (39-40).

For all the nonsense that may have attended Barlo's street-sermon, and epitomized in the fairy tale told to Esther "years afterwards," the most important effect of the incident is conveyed in the final metaphor: the drawing of the "inspired Negress" on the courthouse wall compares to the effect of Barlo on the girl. That the drawing was of

---

<sup>30</sup>Blake, 522, has pointed out the narrator's dissembling, and his ability to immerse himself in his characters.



a black madonna on a light-colored wall has tremendous significance for Esther.

The second part of Esther's story consists of two days, each characterizing phases in her maturation. At sixteen, "Esther begins to dream," her imagination ignited by the low evening sun that seems to set the windows of McGregor's notion shop aflame (40). The sunset image which plays so important a part in the narrator's celebrations of racial identity appear again, at a crucial moment for Esther. But the image is reflected from a commercial structure, removed from its natural context, and therefore distorted. Not surprisingly, Esther's dreams also distort her experiences, especially as they reflect the community. Her dreams show a suppressed desire to identify with the town's easygoing sexual life. Sparked by imagination,

Esther makes believe that [the windows] really are aflame. The town fire department rushes madly down the road. It ruthlessly shoves black and white idlers to one side. It whoops. It clangs. It rescues from the second-story window a dimpled infant which she claims for her own. How had she come by it? She thinks of it immaculately. It is a sin to think of it immaculately. She must dream no more (40-41).

The obvious sexuality of this fantasy, however, is combined with Esther's problems of identity.<sup>31</sup> The way in which both blacks and whites are pushed aside indicates that Esther does not unconsciously favor either group. And the baby, the object of her sexual fantasy,

---

<sup>31</sup>Blake, *ibid.*, relates Esther's conflict to a male-female relationship.

is a veiled allusion to King Barlo. The question, "How had she come by it?" echoes the accusatory chorus in "Becky," "Who gave it to her?" It conveys personal and racial guilt. But more clearly defined, Esther's thinking of the baby "immaculately" and rejecting the thought as sinful gives the best index of her inner crisis. Apparently, she confuses "immaculate conception" with "virgin birth," for she is identifying herself with the Madonna on the courthouse wall and the baby with the Messiah. The word, "immaculately," however, is carefully chosen, and will be clarified in another dream.

Esther's idea of sin obviously connotes sexual relations. But because the narrator places her story in the context of images through which he metaphorically projects the southern black experience, Esther's guilt is not merely the expression of a neurotic girl. Nor can such overwhelming malaise be put off by a resolution to dream no more. Esther does dream again:

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 (41).

This grotesque allegory develops elements incorporated into the first dream. The hidden allusion to the scene where Esther first sees Barlo, kneeling in the "Spittoon," emerges fully here. The latent sexuality

in the spitting episode combines with Barlo's appearance as symbolic Negro, epitomizing the beauty, virility, and physical magnificence of the race, to make him desirable in Esther's unconscious mind. Added to that, the Madonna image creates a new purpose for the "sinful" sexuality. The foulness of the images in Esther's mind is purified by the "immaculately" conceived baby. The baby, itself as "ugly as sin," has a miraculously sweet breath, recalling the "genius of the South/With blood-hot eyes and cane-lipped scented mouth." Thus Esther, in her dream, becomes a bizarre realization of the "cornfield concubines" purified by the "dusky cane-lipped throngs."

At twenty-two, her schooling over, Esther works in her father's grocery store "to keep the money in the family," her father says (41-42). But Esther has grown listless, empty, and does not seem concerned with what her father or his customers think. She is dissociated from black people, though not as concerned with being near white as her father may think. The customers find her "a sweet-natured, accommodating [sic] girl" (42). She, in turn, merely wonders why men do not find her appealing. And in this regard, the word "sweet" can only have painful associations:

She recalls an affair she had with a little fair boy while still in school. It had ended with her shame when he as much as told her that for sweetness he preferred a lollipop. She remembers the salesman from the North who wanted to take her to the movies that first night he was in town. She refused, of course. And he never came back, having found out who she was (42).

The ironic parallels with Karintha continue. Esther, too, has had a childhood sexual experience, but with a very different outcome. Only

her recollections of Barlo seem to give purpose to her life. She recounts his splendors to herself, vaguely aware that her real life slips away from her. She resolves to declare her love for him on his next visit to town. But Barlo does not return for five years. Meanwhile, "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" (43). Esther is a pale imitation of the cornfield concubine.

In the final part of the story, the twenty-seven-year-old Esther is more pale and listless than ever. But she is animated by the announcement that King Barlo, affluent from wartime cotton ventures, has returned. She sees him once more,

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. Pale flame. A sharply dressed white girl passes by. For a moment Esther wishes that she might be like that. Not white; she has no need for being that. But sharp, sporty, with get-up about her. Barlo is connected with that wish (44).

Once again, Esther's dream, but pale, flares up. The visual cues of setting sun and sexual excitement are repeated. The thought that "purposeless, easy-going men" or "loose women" will possess Barlo stirs up the remnants of her competitive spirit:

As if her veins are full of fired sun-bleached southern shanties, a swift heat sweeps them. Dead dreams, and a forgotten resolution are carried upward by the flames. Pale flames (45).

Like Fern, under quite different circumstances, Esther is galvanized. Her distraught behavior as she closes her father's store, determined to act that night, draws the attention of the town's loafers. To them, her seeming oddity fits their appraisal of her character, a

pathetic commentary on the mysterious woman idolized. In a further pathetic detail, the image of her mind as "a pink mesh-bag filled with baby toes" (45) makes a last reference to her ironic sweetness.

Later that night as the town clock tolls midnight, Esther steals out of her parents' home, filling her mind, as she goes through the streets, with images of cold to stiffen her resolve:

After sundown a chill wind came up from the west. It 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 (45).

The blazing fires of the sixteen-year-old's dream, having paled to those flames of the twenty-seven-year-old's, turn to darkened ice as Esther metaphorically prepares to confront her destiny. Signs and portents are all around her, but though she literally closes her eyes to them, she cannot shut them out of her mind:

She will not permit herself to notice the peculiar phosphorescent glitter of the sweet-gum leaves. Their movement would excite her. Exciting, too, the recession of the dull familiar homes she knows so well. She doesn't know them at all. She closes her eyes, and holds them tightly. Won't do. Her being aware that they are closed recalls her purpose. She does not want to think of it. She opens them. She turns now into the deserted business street. The corrugated iron canopies and mule- and horse-gnawed hitching posts bring her a strange composure. Ghosts of the commonplace of her daily life take stride with her and become her companions. And the echoes of her heels upon the flagging are rhythmically monotonous and soothing (45-46).

In the dark, the glowing trees and the fading of familiar buildings tend to disorient Esther, as if to remove her into another world. The dream-like quality excites her. But she closes her eyes against these disorienting images. Even that does not help ward off their power. Significantly, the business district with its images of man-made

objects, for example, the gnawed hitching posts hinting at subjugation, helps control her vagaries. She is reassured by the hollow sound of her own footsteps.

Esther knows that King Barlo is spending the night at Nat Bowie's place, a house of prostitution. In approaching the place, she goes through a kind of purgatory, struggling within herself over her moral objections, her physical loathing, and her waning desire. Almost, momentarily, the spell of the few vestiges of agrarian life overcome her. But through a force of will she succeeds in shutting out the spell of her imagination. She reaches the house and finds her way into the room where King Barlo lies in a stupor of satiety. The scene resembles her dream as she offers herself to Barlo. Instead of spitting, the room is so heavy with tobacco smoke that it makes her sick. Other women are present in the room and laugh at her approach. And when Esther finally makes herself understood to Barlo,

she sees a smile, ugly and repulsive to her, working upward through thick licker fumes. Barlo seems hideous. The thought comes suddenly, that conception with a drunken man must be a mighty sin. She draws away, frozen. Like a somnambulist she wheels around and walks stiffly to the stairs. Down them. Jeers and hoots pelt bluntly upon her back. She steps out. There is no air, no street, and the town has completely disappeared (48).

The terms of her dream are hideously realized in the brute ugliness of Esther's love-object, the fouled "immaculate conception," and the jeers of the women. But the magical baby whose sweet breath disarmed the town's ridicule fails to perform here. The fires that kindled her child's imagination, her adolescent passion, have gone out at

last, leaving her "frozen." The actual moment has canceled out the dream, leaving her in a vacuum.

Though the narrative point of view is largely limited to Esther, the absent narrator nevertheless manages to infuse his poetic myth of a black race regenerated into the mind of a pathetically deranged woman. Esther clearly is part of the moon phase of the narrator's mythic landscape. Moreover, as the poem "Conversion" and "Portrait in Georgia" which follow demonstrate, the moon phase symbolizes the degeneration of the black race under the cultural influence of the white. This theme reaches almost apocalyptic dimensions in the last story of Part I, "Blood-Burning Moon."

As with the preceding two stories, "Blood-Burning Moon" dispenses with the device of the epigraph, though a folk song-like fragment concludes each of the story's three parts. The opening paragraph sets the mood of dusk superseded by moonlight, dramatically pointing up an atmosphere of decay:<sup>32</sup>

Up from the skeleton stone walls, up from the rotting floor boards and the solid hand-hewn beams of oak of the pre-war cotton factory, dusk came. Up from the dusk the full moon came. Glowing like a fired pine-knot, it illuminated the great door and soft showered the Negro shanties aligned along the single street of factory town. The full moon in the great door was an omen. Negro women improvised songs against its spell (51).

---

<sup>32</sup>Blake, 523, interprets this decay as an aspect of pervasive chaos in Cane. Reilly, 317, sums up the decay in a discussion of "racial caste mores" and jealousy. And Fischer notes in it the absence of "human or spiritual consummation," 200.

The factory, presented as an image of death and decay, dominates the scene symbolically and literally. Even the moon, its description poignantly recalling the smoldering fragments of pine in the first half of Part I, rises out of the factory's graveyard-like image. Unseen Negro women, sensing the evil influence, try to work a counter-spell in song.

The singing serves to introduce Louisa, a central figure in the unfolding story, as she comes over the crest of a hill on her way home. The description of her is crammed with nature imagery:

Her skin was the color of oak leaves on young trees in fall.  
Her breasts, firm and up-pointed like ripe acorns. And her  
singing had the low murmur of winds in fig trees (51).

The description conveys the mood of autumn ripeness, with all its implied incipient decay. The passage recalls the atmosphere of "Face" where the image of an old woman's face focuses on "cluster grapes of sorrow/purple in the evening sun/nearly ripe for worms" (14). But Louisa is a young woman, and though she may metaphorically lose the adornments of that youth, she appears vigorous. In her mind appear thoughts of her two lovers, one white and the other black: Bob Stone, the younger son of the whites Louisa works for, and Tom Burwell, a field-worker, whose "black balanced, and pulled against, the white of Stone, when she thought of them" (52). Thus Louisa tries to hold both white and black with her woman's attractions. She schemes, vaguely, haphazardly, to hold off a confrontation between Stone and Burwell who, so far, are unaware that they are rivals for her love. The perilous atmosphere, however, insinuates itself



into her thoughts. And as her confidence is shaken, dogs bark and roosters crow "as if heralding a weird dawn or some ungodly awakening" (53). The scene ironically recalls King Barlo's proclamation of a new dawn in the east. The women, terrified, redouble their singing. Louisa sinks down on her doorstep. The first part of the story ends with an ominous motto:

Red nigger moon. Sinner!  
Blood-burning moon. Sinner!  
Come out that fact'ry door (53).

The second part of the story introduces Tom Burwell and sets in motion the inevitable outcome of any love triangle. Metaphorically, the atmosphere continues from the first part:

Up from the deep dusk of a cleared spot on the edge of the forest a mellow glow arose and spread fan-wise into the low-hanging heavens. All around the air was heavy with the scent boiling cane (53-54).

This passage comes full circle to the "oracular" epigraph on the title page and momentarily disarms the ominous moon image that opens the story. It is a reminder that, though the physical and spiritual qualities of the black may show ominous signs of degeneration, there still persists great beauty in the race and its native soil. To emphasize the duality of black people who still live close to the soil, the narrator re-introduces Old David Georgia, the man who brought syrup to Becky just before she committed her second indiscretion. As he stirs the syrup over his stove, telling stories to field hands gathered around it, he becomes a personification of Negro folk lore. But as his stories turn to gossip in the mouths of the men around him, the redolent atmosphere turns petty, and Old David

seems to be stirring up a witches' brew. Tom Burwell, sitting among the men, participates in the celebration of local events with equanimity until someone mentions Louisa's relations with the white man, Bob Stone. Believing that he defends Louisa's honor, Tom attacks the men:

Several of Manning's friends get up to fight for him. Tom whipped out a long knife and would have cut them to shreds if they hadn't ducked into the woods. Tom had had enough. He nodded to Old David Georgia and swung down the path to factory town. Just then, the dogs started barking and the roosters began to crow (55).

As the too explicit reference to the "weird dawn or . . . ungodly awakening" shows, this scene will have dire consequences. Tom leaves to confront Louisa, to be reassured about the rumors he has just heard, and to declare his love. Louisa's feigned ignorance of the cause of the rumors does reassure Tom, and he urges Louisa to sing as an accompaniment to his love-making. As he slips his body down beside hers, "the full moon sank upward into the deep purple of the cloud-bank" (59). Restless shadows from the shanties are projected onto the gray dust of the road, where they seem to fight each other as Louisa and Tom set the whole street to singing the charm against evil:

Red nigger moon. Sinner! . . .

In the story's final scene, Bob Stone and Tom Burwell are drawn into an inevitable clash that unleashes not only their individual forces of pride and lust, but also the pent-up forces in the white community. The opening description has shifted away from the factory town, but as Bob Stone saunters from his house, he is greeted by the

gloom of fir trees and magnolias. The clear white of his skin paled, and the flush of his cheeks turned purple. As if to balance this outer change, his mind became consciously a white man's (58-59).

Perhaps the narrator intrudes rather heavy-handedly in suggesting that Bob Stone's thoughts can plausibly respond to changes in his appearance, of which he could hardly be aware. The tinge of purple cane intruding into the privileged environment of the plantation is in keeping with the images the narrator develops throughout the first part of Cane. In his mind, Bob asserts himself as a slave-owner of the past, able to boldly take whatever black woman suited him. He resents having to sneak about to see Louisa. He is concerned with what his family would think of his affair with a black girl, but he also resists the idea that he is any way accountable for his actions. He particularly chafes over his family's lost racial status, resenting the fact that he must cut through the fields to reach Louisa.

Bob's thoughts of Louisa also reveal conflict:

Beautiful nigger gal. Why nigger? Why not, just gal? No it was because she was nigger that he went to her (61).

At some level in his thinking, Bob is actually concerned with the black woman as a human being rather than as a representative of race. But he is also aware that part of Louisa's attraction for him lies exactly in the taboos and the master-slave relationship. He seems determined to recapture his family's "lost ground," yet in his doubts about himself, and his puzzlement over the mystery of the Negro, he seems to be trying to find himself. The narrator, who has projected the mystery of the Negro through the women--the very elements that

have led him to affirm and celebrate his racial identity--dramatizes the universal appeal of those qualities through Bob Stone. That Bob is troubled suggests that he struggles between his latent respect for the Negro and the urgency of his lust and pride. Significantly, this inner struggle takes place as he walks through a canefield. And as he goes, Old David Georgia's boiling syrup comes to him. Without thinking, he has come close to the clearing where, only shortly before, Tom Burwell attacked the men who impugned Louisa's character.

As luck would have it, Bob overhears the returned men discussing his relationship with Louisa and what Tom Burwell might do about it. He hears the men talk about Tom's prowess as a knife-fighter and that Tom may seek out Bob when he learns of Louisa's duplicity. All the unresolved mixture of pride and mystery well up in Bob and he goes off toward factory town to find his rival. But as he plunges blindly down the path to town:

Halfway along, a blindness within him veered him aside. He crashed into the bordering canebrake. Cane leaves cut his face and lips. He tasted blood. He threw himself down and dug his fingers in the ground. The earth was cool. Cane-roots took the fever from his hands. After a long while, or so it seemed to him the thought came to him that it must be time to see Louisa. He got to his feet and walked calmly to their meeting place. No Louisa (62).

The cane here seems to have curative powers. The narrator suggests, again, the universality of the Negro's mystery. But as a restorative, the effects of the canefield are temporary for Bob. When he realizes that if Louisa is not at the appointed place she must be with Tom Burwell, his fury returns. Again, he rushes blindly on. The emphasis on his rushing blindly becomes both literal and figurative. His

stumbling over a running hound produces a yelp that sets off the barking and cackling over the countryside all over again. The singing in factory town abruptly stops as Bob bursts down onto Louisa and Tom on the doorstep. In response to his query, Tom identifies himself. Without further ado, Bob lunges at him, but he is clearly overmatched. Tom easily side-steps him, flings him to the ground, and straddles him. No sooner does Tom release him, than Bob lunges again, with the same result. When Bob grows abusive, calling Tom a "godam [sic] nigger," (64) Tom lashes out at him. Badly beaten, Bob draws a knife, whereupon Tom draws his and promptly slashes Bob's throat. His life literally pouring out of him, Bob staggers toward white town and collapses in the arms of white men, naming Tom Burwell with his last breath.

The mobilization of the white men into a lynch mob comes straight out of King Barlo's speech in "Esther." Like ants whose silent communications are as instantaneous as they are miraculous, the whites mobilize in a "taut hum" of hive-like activity that rises to a roar:

Then nothing could be heard but the flop of their feet in the thick dust of the road. The moving body of their silence preceded them over the crest of the hill into factory town. It flattened the Negroes beneath it. It rolled to the wall of the factory, where it stopped. Tom knew that they were coming. He couldn't move. And then he saw the search-lights of the two cars glaring down on him. A quick shock went through him. He stiffened. He started to run. A yell went up from the mob. Tom wheeled about and faced them. They poured down on him. They swarmed. A large man with dead-white face and flabby cheeks came to him and almost jabbed a gun-barrel through his guts (65).

The ironic contrast of the "hive-like" behavior of the whites with the singing of the Negroes is especially poignant. It also foreshadows "Beehive" in Part II. But here, the hive is an image of terrible, mindless determination. The swarm of men prepares to burn Tom alive. The momentum of their rush carries them past the thought of burning him over the well to the factory where there is already a supply of wood. The mob drives a stake into the ground, piling rotting floor boards around it. They pour kerosene over the wood, then bind Tom to the stake. Christ-like, little lines of blood trickle from the scratches of nails on his head. The image also recalls Fern, sitting on her porch, her head inclined where a nail had been driven into the porch post. The scene becomes a macabre, distorted celebration. Torches quickly ignite the wood, and when Tom's eyes pop and his head slumps, the mob gives vent to a triumphant yell that echoes and re-echoes against "the skeleton stone walls." Even after the sound has dissipated, the "ghost of a yell" slips out the great factory door and flutters down the street (67). Louisa does not hear the yell, but opens her eyes and sees the full moon glowing in the great door. She begins to sing, hoping that the people she knew would 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 fact'ry door (67).

The first part of Cane ends with a story that augurs ill for the black race and the narrator's dream of regeneration. The southern milieu, source of the narrator's inspiration and hope, seems to offer progressive degeneration into madness and despair. The blacks who are virile enough to renew the race are either charlatans or rash fools who do not weigh the consequences of their acts. Those more imaginative are either thwarted by forces beyond their control or driven to madness. All come under the pervasive influence of white culture and its hive instincts. Even a promising individual like Tom Burwell who, in physical prowess, competes with King Barlo (57) and easily beats a powerful white opponent, succumbs to the white hive. The individuals who make up Part I of Cane, however beautiful, vital, imaginative, are no match for social evolution. But the narrator has left without participating directly in the violent episodes he relates. Clearly, the seed of a Messiah cannot be implanted in a southern Madonna.





## CHAPTER IV

### THE NARRATIVES OF PART II

If the narrator of the first part of Cane shifts his position in the poetry and prose as he progressively identifies with, moves into the center of, then comes into conflict with the black ethos in the South, his explorations in the North follow a different pattern in Part II. The male adoration of the woman mysterious, the influence of the hive-like white culture on the highly individualistic and often asocial behavior of the blacks, and the degeneration of the individual continue as major motifs in his design. But unlike Part I, where the narrator's affirmations of ethnic heritage roughly correspond with his emergence as a character in the prose, Part II shows him fully emerged at the beginning and thereafter withdrawn. The poetry, on the other hand, shows him withdrawn at the beginning and thereafter progressively revealed. Thus his contrasting roles seem to develop the motifs and metaphors in different directions.

Other differences appear. For example, the narratives are less sketchy, more fully developed stories, though still episodic in structure. This trend actually began with "Fern" in the second half of Part I, where the narrator began to reverse his attitudes about the renewal of the Negro. Indeed, the development of the narrator's attitudes seems to keep pace with his development of the characters. The stories tend to become longer as he combines and permutes earlier motifs

to shed new light and meaning on old experience, then places new characters and new settings into that assimilated metaphoric context. As a result, there are only four narratives in the second part of Cane as compared with six in the first. More importantly, these stories no longer focus primarily on female characters.

Yet "Avey," the first of the four stories in the second part, seems to be an exception to the others. As the title suggests, a female character is central to the story. In fact, the narrator's involvement with her, the development of the action, and even the theme of mysterious woman adored by men bear strong resemblances to what is happening in "Fern." The first of its five episodes begins with the invisible brotherhood of adoring men now reduced to the level of street boys:

For a long while she was nothing more to me than one of those skirted beings whom boys at a certain age disdain to play with. Just how I came to love her, timidly, and with secret blushes, I do not know. But that I did was brought home to me one night, the first night that Ned wore his long pants. Us fellers were seated on the curb before an apartment house where she had gone in. The young trees had not outgrown their boxes then. V Street was lined with them. When our legs grew cramped and stiff from the cold of the stone, we'd stand around a box and whittle it. I like to think now that there was a hidden purpose in the way we hacked them with our knives. I like to feel that something deep in me responded to the trees, the young trees that whinnied like colts impatient to be let free. . . (76)

Though the boys' interest centers in a "skirted being," the real interest of this passage is its striking revelation of the narrator's mind. The narrator does not begin with a metaphoric projection of some woman of hypnotic attraction. He begins, instead, with a metaphoric projection of his own mind as an adult recalling, and even



satirizing in an indulgent way, his adolescence. The manipulation of diction resembles that of "Fern." The inflated erudition of "skirted beings" and "disdain" followed by the slangy "Us fellers" shows a similar affectation. Perhaps here it is used more clearly for comic effect.

But the central metaphor is male. The trees, their roots confined in boxes, echo the figurative construction of the natural impulses of plants, animals, and people in the southern landscape. Here, they whinny like colts, a male image, and by juxtaposing the image of the young trees in their boxes with that of the young boys in their pants, the narrator suggests a connection between growing pains and the psychological stunting of the black females in the South. The implied prestige of long pants over short, the legs grown "cramped and stiff," and the impulse to hack at the boxes develop the "interest of the male, who wishes to ripen a growing thing too soon. . ." (1) in a northern context. Even the allusion to horses, classic symbols of lusts and emotions, develops this "interest."

Avey seems to be very like Karintha in her precocious sexuality. From the narrator's comments and the boys' discussion, we learn that Avey is with a college student. Neither her age nor that of the boys is stated, but Avey's age cannot exceed the boys' by much, as later events in the story suggest. Ned appears to be the oldest of the boys, since they tolerate his boasts about his sexual prowess:

"Hell, bet I could get her too if you little niggers weren't always spying and crabbing everything" (77)

and his assumed superior knowledge:

Ned knew, of course. There was nothing he didnt know when it came to women. He dilated on the emotional needs of girls. Said they werent much different from men in that respect. And concluded with the solemn avowal: "It does em good." None of us liked Ned much. We all talked dirt; but it was the way he said it. And then too, a couple of the fellers had sisters and had caught Ned playing with them. But there was no disputing the superiority of his smutty wisdom (77-78).

And in this episode, Ned wears his long pants for the first time. Thus Avey's consorting with an older man, the college student, suggests precociousness. When one of the boys says that Avey will marry the college student, Ned hotly contends that no one will marry her but he. The boys privately doubt that, but conclude that Avey will leave school soon and marry. Apparently, Ned has stirred the narrator's competitive instincts and adolescent sexual fantasies, for the episode concludes with the narrator's going home, imagining that he is married to Avey (78).

The second episode stresses the narrator's competitiveness, his desire to assert himself, even to dominate Avey:

Nothing I did seemed able to change Avey's indifference to me. I played basket-ball, and when I'd make a long clean shot she'd clap with the others, louder than they, I thought. I'd meet her on the street, and there'd be no difference in the way she said hello (78-79).

The narrator appears older by several years. Yet he cannot impress himself upon Avey. As he describes his attempts to make Avey notice him, he becomes increasingly puzzled by her unresponsiveness.<sup>1</sup> Like Fern,

---

<sup>1</sup>Catherine L. Innes, "The Unity of Jean Toomer's *Cane*," *CLA Journal*, 15 (March 1972) 313 picks up the similarity of Avey to Fern in this strange unresponsiveness. Curtis William Ellison, "Black Adam: The Adamic Assertion and the Afro-American Novelist" (University of Minnesota, 1970), pp. 129-30, also shows several points of correspondence between the behavior of Avey and Fern.

the woman encourages the male, then turns him away. And as in his relationship with her, the narrator is not content to let it go at that. He feels that he must try. On an excursion to an amusement park, the narrator, Ned, and the gang of boys who seem perennially to hang around Avey, treat her. The narrator fancies himself "a crack swimmer" and "somewhat of a dancer" (79), and tries to make Avey notice him. The implied competition for her is strikingly revealed in the narrative, though the narrator does not seem to be aware of his attitude. His concern is that, as he holds her tightly in his arms, she seems distant. He believes that her mind is on "that college feller who lived on the top floor" (79). Each of the boys treats her until his money is exhausted, whereupon Avey deserts him for the next. Each, in turn, resents her, Ned most of all. The narrator, alone, does not resent her using him in this fashion, and to this equanimity, attributes his apparent success with her:

This is the reason, I guess, why I had her to myself on the top deck of the Jane Mosely that night as we puffed up the Potomac, coming home. The moon was brilliant. The air was sweet like clover. And every now and then, a salt tang, a stale drift of sea-weed. It was not my mind's fault if it went romancing. I should have taken her in my arms the minute we were stowed in that old lifeboat. I dallied, dreaming. She took me in hers. And I could feel by the touch of it that it wasnt man-to-woman love. It made me restless. I felt chagrined. I didnt know what it was, but I did know that I couldnt handle it. She ran her fingers through my hair and kissed my forehead. I itched to break through her tenderness to passion. I wanted her to take me in her arms as I knew she had that college feller. I wanted her to love me passionately as she did him. I gave her one burning kiss. Then she laid me in her lap as if I were a child. Helpless. I got sore when she started to hum a lullaby. She wouldnt let me go. I talked. I knew damned well that I could beat her at that. Her eyes were soft and misty, the curves of her lips were wistful, and by her smile seemed indulgent of the

irrelevance of my remarks. I gave up at last and let her love me, silently, in her own way. The moon was brilliant. The air was sweet like clover, and every now and then, a salt tang, a stale drift of sea-weed. . . (80-81)

But the success is short-lived. Avey defeats the narrator utterly.

Much of the thwarted maternity of the southern black woman begins to fall into place in this northern counterpart. The encapsulation of the incident within the moon image serves to reinforce the moon phase of the Negro, to show the confined, stunted relationship between the narrator and Avey, and to further define the role of the male. The baleful, blood-red moon of "Blood-Burning Moon" has turned brilliant, suggestive of the silvery moonlight of "Beehive" which follows. The fragrance of clover further enhances the hive association. The whiffs of stale salt-air intruding into the image suggest that something is awry. The whole creates a metaphor of the hive-like white culture's influence on the Negro. Within this reiterated metaphor, the narrator and Avey work at cross-purposes. In the southern context, the narrator several times raises the issue of assertive action, in each case ending badly. Perhaps in a more natural, uncontaminated milieu, assertiveness might bring fulfillment, but in the hive-like, contained atmosphere of the North, and even where this influence has intruded in the South, assertiveness only leads to aborted human relations. The narrator senses this problem, and laments his hesitation. Yet there is no guarantee, if his experiences in the South are indicators, that he would have succeeded better had he acted differently. The process of cultural interpenetration seems to have gone too far. Symbolically, Avey treats the narrator as a baby because she is figuratively older.

But the narrator acts like a baby not merely because he is younger, figuratively and probably literally, but because he intellectualizes his deeper feelings. Were he able to engage Avey in talk, he should have beaten her. He cannot, however, cope with her distant maternalism. He thinks rather than acts. Somehow, Avey paralyzes him.

In the third episode, the narrator's determination to act, to break through Avey's detachment, to touch her figuratively continues to unfold in redeveloped images and motifs reminiscent of Part I. His next encounter with Avey takes place the summer following the incident atop the Jane Mosely. Appropriately, he sits with her on Lover's Leap at Harpers Ferry and contemplates the railroad tracks that cut through the cliff-side and the trees growing on it:

The engines of this valley have a whistle, the echoes of which sound like iterated gasps and sobs. I always think of them as crude music from the soul of Avey. We sat there holding hands. Our palms were soft and warm against each other. Our fingers were not tight. She would not let them be. She would not let me twist them. I wanted to talk. To explain what I meant to her. Avey was as silent as those great trees whose tops we looked down upon. She has always been like that. At least, to me. I had the notion that if I really wanted to, I could do with her just what I pleased. Like one can strip a tree. I did kiss her. I even let my hands cup her breasts. When I was through, she'd seek my hand and hold it till my pulse cooled down (81-82).

The mystery of Avey, like that of Fern, is composed of landscape and sexual love restrained. The listless quality of the train image begun in "Becky" and continued in "Fern" reappears in this passage as the "crude music from the soul of Avey." The narrator suggests that something is bottled up in the young woman that struggles for expression. He modulates the impatience of the young, boxed trees "that whinnied



like colts" into the great, silent trees. His desire to talk, to unfold himself to Avey, becomes a half-realized desire to free her. But there is also an element of exploitation in his desire. When he thinks that he might do with her as he pleased, "like one can strip a tree," he stirs up the repeated references to the trees reduced to sawdust in the first part of Cane. Even more significant is the allusion to "Song of the Son":

O Negro slaves, dark purple ripened plums,  
Squeezed, and bursting in the pine-wood air,  
Passing, before they stripped the old tree bare  
One plum was saved for me . . . (21).

The narrator confuses his desire to somehow free Avey from her silence of soul with his own physical desires. His thoughts of twisting and stripping resemble the incursions of commerce and industry into the southern landscape, metaphorically, the "interest of the male. . . ."

Frustrated again by the maternal behavior of Avey, the narrator does not yet resent her. As the pair meet frequently over an unspecified period of time, he becomes concerned for her reputation. Avey's attitude toward local gossips, unlike Fern's (31), is indifference. This indifference is matched by her feelings about her future. Having completed normal school, Avey seems disinclined to look for a teaching job. This additional unresponsiveness begins to annoy the narrator. Like his counterpart in "Fern," he is impatient with lack of ambition:

As time went on, her indifference to things began to pique me; I was ambitious. I left the Ferry earlier than she did. I was going off to college. The more I thought of it, the more I resented, yes, hell, that's what it was, her downright laziness.

Sloppy indolence. There was no excuse for a healthy girl taking life so easy. Hell! she was no better than a cow. I was certain that she was a cow when I felt an udder in a Wisconsin stock-judging class (82-83).

Indeed, the narrator turns quite critical, mixing sarcasm with his general resentment and frustration. He tries to forget her at the University of Wisconsin:

Among those energetic Swedes, or whatever they are, I decided to forget her. For two years I thought I did. When I'd come home for the summer she'd be away. And before she returned, I'd be gone. We never wrote; she was too damned lazy for that. But what a bluff I put up about forgetting her. The girls up that way, at least the ones I knew, haven't got the stuff: they don't know how to love. Giving themselves completely was tame beside just the holding of Avey's hand (83).

But he cannot. Avey is one of those puzzling women who, perhaps because of their remoteness, seem to have a stronger appeal for men than those who give themselves freely.<sup>2</sup>

The narrator distantly alludes to Avey's having gotten and lost a teaching job, indicating that her slovenliness and loose behavior have at last taken their effect on her reputation. When the narrator returns to Washington, he searches for her and learns from Ned that she has descended to the level of a common whore (84). In the fourth episode, the narrator resumes the story. He cites a hiatus of five years during which he searched fruitlessly for Avey in New York:

The business of hunting a job or something or other had bruised my vanity so that I could recognize it. I felt old. Avey and my real relation to her, I thought I came to know. I wanted to

---

<sup>2</sup>Cf. the narrator's discussion of women in "Fern," pp. 24-26, Cane.

see her. I had been told that she was in New York. As I had no money, I hiked and bummed my way there. I got work in a shipyard and walked the streets at night, hoping to meet her. Failing in this, I saved enough to pay my fare back home (84).

The narrator's feeling of maturation is an important element in his story. He believes that, older physically and emotionally, he is ready for Avey. Having come to terms with himself, he now feels that he can influence the wayward woman. Unexpectedly, he encounters her again in Washington:

One evening in early June, just at the time when dusk is most lovely on the eastern horizon, I saw Avey, indolent as ever, leaning on the arm of a man, strolling under the recently lit arc-lights of U Street. She had almost passed before she recognized me. She showed no surprise. The puff over her eyes had grown heavier. The eyes themselves were still sleepy-large, and beautiful. I had almost concluded--indifferent. "You look older," was what she said. I wanted to convince her that I was, so I asked her to walk with me (84-85).

Avey, too, notices the narrator's maturation. And in a scene reflecting the images of dusk in the southern landscape, shows how far the northern milieu has transformed the southern woman. Avey is a realization of the Fern to whom men of Washington, Chicago, or New York could bring nothing "left vacant by the bestowal of their bodies" (28-29). Even the invitation for a walk suggests that scene in "Fern" where the narrator struggled to find a way of doing "some fine thing" for her. The replacement of the sun with arc-lights emphasizes the alienation of the southern woman from nature.

But in the final episode, the narrator shows that he has been trying to place Avey back into a re-created southern landscape. He takes her to a park where he goes whenever he wants

the simple beauty of another's soul. Robins spring about the lawn all day. They leave their footprints in the grass. I imagine that the grass at night smells sweet and fresh because of them (85).

This image recalls the "smooth and sweet" pine needles "elastic to the feet of rabbits" onto which Karintha dropped her child. That the narrator intends this association consciously is verified by the following lines:

The ground is high. Washington lies below. Its light spreads like a blush against the darkened sky. Against the soft dusk sky of Washington. And when the wind is from the South, soil of my homeland falls like a fertile shower upon the lean streets of the city. Upon my hill in Soldier's Home (85).

The elements of renewal still appear uppermost in the narrator's imagery, and it is thoughts of the South that "fertilize" his imagination. To help set the idea of the spot as being near to his own "soul," the narrator tells of going there alone at night, of befriending the policeman who patrols the area:

I tell him I come there to find the truth that people bury in their hearts. I tell him that I do not come there with a girl to do the thing he's paid to watch out for. I look deep in his eyes when I say these things, and he believes me (85-86).

He clarifies his purpose in bringing Avey to the place. Surrounded by the metaphors and associations of the southern landscape, the narrator seeks to invest Avey with his ritual of transformed woman. The vespers of "Georgia Dusk," where the Negro singers "Give virgin lips to corn-field concubines," echo in the narrator's wish that the Howard Glee Club were singing "Deep River" (86).

Since the only background music comes from a band playing a march that jars against the narrator's attempts to create a mood, he

begins to hum a folk-tune. At this moment, Avey cradles herself in his arm and, kissing his hand, seems to listen to what the narrator has 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. How it could not meet it. I pointed out that in lieu of proper channels, her emotions had overflowed into paths that dissipated them. 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. I sang, with a strange quiver in my voice, a promise-song (86-87).

Ironically, where Avey had previously cradled the narrator in her arms, effectively reducing him to the level of a child, she now assumes a child-like pose in his arms. In this posture of submission, the narrator, at last, has his chance to talk. And in his talk, he finally articulates what in the past he could only hint at: Avey and other women like her need some outlet for their powerful emotions that a place like Washington cannot supply. This lack of suitable outlet leads to their being stunted. His talk epitomizes the condition of the southern woman as well, except that they have the consolation of the beautiful southern landscape and the magical folk-songs at dusk. For the dissipated woman of the northern, urban milieu, the narrator promises Avey an art which will free her confined spirit. He does not specify the nature of that art, but he implies that he is working on the idea. In effect, he asks Avey to believe in him, and in his promise of salvation. He assumes a messianic role.

But Avey fails to respond, and the narrator discovers that she has fallen asleep.<sup>3</sup> His beautiful vision of salvation has not reached her. His passion for her dies, yet he does not want to disturb her because she seems so like a child. In his restlessness and frustration, he wants "to get up and whittle at the boxes of young trees" (87), returning to the image with which he began the story. Not only is Avey imprisoned within her "box," but he is as well. A Messiah without followers, with no one to save, must be frustrated. In this case, the narrator's attempt to renew the black race symbolically in art is aborted in Avey. In fact, he finds that he cannot rouse her at all, and finally he and the policeman conclude that she is best left where she lies until dawn. They borrow a blanket from a nearby house, and the narrator watches beside her

through the night. I saw the dawn steal over Washington. The Capitol dome looked like a gray ghost ship drifting in from the sea. Avey's face was pale, and her eyes were heavy. She did not have the gray crimson-splashed beauty of the dawn. I hated to wake her. Orphan-woman. . . (88)

The narrator's hope of a new dawn is cruelly disappointed. The Capitol becomes visible as a reminder of the pine-smoke wraiths of the South,

---

<sup>3</sup>John M. Reilly. "The Search for Black Redemption: Jean Toomer's Cane," Studies in the Novel, 2 (Fall 1970) 318, stresses the narrator's middle-class values put Avey to sleep, as does Innes, 313. Susan L. Blake, "The Spectatorial Artist and the Structure of Cane," CLA Journal, 17 (June 1974) 525, finds irony in the fact that the narrator has "aroused" himself at the moment he puts Avey to sleep. Ellison, p. 130, finds the narrator "pompous." Only Charles W. Scruggs, "The Mark of Cain and the Redemption of Art: A Study in Theme and Structure of Jean Toomer's Cane," American Literature, 44 (May 1972) 286, believes that the narrator really understands Avey at the end.

and the ship metaphor suggests a link with the slave ships that first brought blacks to America. Looking at Avey, the narrator sees the paleness that links her to the deformed, stunted Negro, victim of the hive-like white culture. The new dawn of Barlo in "Esther" becomes the false dawn of "Blood-Burning Moon," and with the words, "Orphan-woman. . . ," the narrator concludes his story, disillusioned. Avey's distance and emptiness become alienation. She is an orphan because she is cut off from her cultural heritage.

"Avey," alone among the narratives and poetry of Cane, presents a problem of continuity in the narrator's experience. Beginning when the narrator is just a boy and ending when he is, presumably, still a young man, the story nowhere accounts for his southern experience in Part I. One might argue that the five-year hiatus between episodes three and four allows ample time for the sojourn in the South that makes up Part I, but without a direct reference to such a visit in "Avey," the idea is mere speculation. Since Cane is not a novel, and the narrator is not a principal character, perhaps such absolute continuity is neither necessary nor desirable. The narrative tone, however, the motifs, the images, are indeed continuous and unified into a theme.<sup>4</sup> And that theme begins to emerge quite clearly.

---

<sup>4</sup>Peter G. Kousaleos, "A Study of the Language, Structure, and Symbolism in Jean Toomer's Cane and N. Scott Momaday's House Made of Dawn" (Ohio University, 1973), p. 77. Kousaleos stresses the associational, accretional force of Toomer's imagistic technique.

If renewal of the black race needs a Madonna to bear a leader, that hope is forlorn in the South because, though the women are still vibrant and passionate, they are in various ways stunted and deformed. Only in the beauty of their songs and in their less inhibited behavior do some vestige of their potential remain. The potential Messiah figures similarly show the marks of spiritual degeneration. In the North, the narrator of "Avey" decides to create an art that will free black women of the restraints and dissipations foisted upon them by white civilization. He tries to awaken Avey, literally and figuratively, only to find that she is too far sunk in slumber to respond. Momentarily taking the mantle of Messiah on himself, the narrator begins to shift his position.

In "Theater," the narrator withdraws into the background once again. He observes, he celebrates the "Seventh Street" ambience of Washington:

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

The motif of black life "thrusting unconscious rhythms, black reddish blood into the white and whitewashed wood of Washington" (71) persists in the introductory image of Howard Theater.<sup>5</sup> The image of splintering wood, carried over into the narrator's urge to whittle boxes in "Avey,"

---

<sup>5</sup>The opening of "Theater" is variously interpreted: Innes, 314, comments on the negative aspects of "dilution" implied in it; Rafael A. Cancel, "Male and Female Interrelationships in Toomer's *Cane*," *Negro American Literature Forum*, 5 (Spring 1971) 28, sees in the "nigger life" absorbed by the white as an inducement for Negroes--John, in particular--to daydream. Ellison, p. 131, and Kousaleos, p. 80, see the "alley life" as a more vital link with the black soul.



appears again in the reference to the theater's walls. The theater, too, is a kind of box, and one in which "art" is presented. The vibrant life works into the building from both sides:

Black-skinned, they dance and shout above the tick and trill of white-walled buildings. At night, they open doors to people who come in to stamp their feet and shout. At night, road-shows volley songs into the mass-heart of black people. Songs soak the walls and seep out to the nigger life of alleys and near-beer saloons, of the Poodle Dog and Black Bear cabarets. Afternoons, the house is dark and the walls are sleeping singers until rehearsal begins (91).

Here, too, the walls are white and continue the metaphoric suggestion of racial mingling from "Seventh Street." But fragmentation gives way to permeation. The walls do not completely contain or exclude, but subtly transmit. Thus the street atmosphere works its way into the theater and the theater atmosphere works its way into the street, setting up mutually interpenetrating environments. The metaphor implies that, though the barriers of the white world may inhibit communication between the "real" world and the "artificial," and between different segments of the black population, vigor and common racial heritage spontaneously draw them together again. The idea is very important for a narrator who still hopes that art may salvage what reality has fragmented.

Unlike "Avey," "Theater" is tightly limited in time and place, the entire action occurring during a single rehearsal session. This story also focuses strongly on a male character, John, the manager's brother. The somnolent walls respond to his presence:

Or until John comes within them. Then they start throbbing to a subtle syncopation. And the space-dark air grows softly luminous (91).

If John were at one with the "mass-heart of black people" who attend performances at the theater, no "subtle syncopation" between him and the walls would exist. His appearance immediately hints at the conflict to come. That he seems to set the darkened air aglow provides a theatrical touch presaging the stage lighting: it also alludes to the symbolic lights which wax and wane with the narrator's revelations.

To the mixture of prose and poetry which infuse the narratives, Toomer adds elements of playscript. The next passage reads like stage directions:

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. Thoughts rush to, and compact about it. Life of the house and of the slowly awakening stage swirls to the body of John, and thrills it. John's body is separate from the thoughts that pack his mind (91-92).

In the contained, physically isolated world of the theater, external sounds and light are usually excluded. Yet the narrator has already created a metaphoric permeability in the walls to sound, to life style. Here he creates an actual window, conveniently located up high so that it can filter actual light down on his character in the manner of a spotlight. It throws John's face into a sharp division that continues the play of light and dark, as in sunset and dusk, that figures so prominently in the first part of Cane. It specifically recalls the reflected sunlight which set Esther to dreaming. The unusual effect created, the "compaction" of the house lights around the beam rather

than its diffusion, serves as a device for John's inner conflict. He is symbolically divided by the lights: the external light represents his mind; the house lights represent his body.

Having established John's physical appearance in the setting and through it implied his inner condition, the "stage directions" turn to the stage itself:

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. His mind, contained above desires of his body, singles the girls out, and tries to trace origins and plot destinies (92).

The color, pink, does not figure prominently in the imagery of Cane. In fact, the only other conspicuous reference to it occurs in "Esther," just as she has made up her mind to offer herself to King Barlo. The association between Esther's mind, a "pink mesh-bag filled with baby toes," and the stage-lights' shine, "as if . . . through clear pink fingers," is fairly tenuous. Yet the metaphoric fabric of Cane is built up of just such fragments. And the color motifs carry the phases of shifting racial consciousness through the individual awareness of the characters. Pink lacks the vibrancy of the purples, golds, and reds of the deeper ethnic identity, and therefore represents the paling toward the moon phase of black experience. Pink also suggests artificiality, an obvious association with the stage setting. When the color coincides with the introduction of a second character, Dorris, all of the implications are weighted with increased significance. That she stands in shadow might suggest some negative meaning, but the detail apparently accounts for John's inability to sense her among the other chorus girls.

John's mind and body still respond separately as

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 t papa!) Crude, individualized, and yet . . . monotonous. . . (92)

As the narrative "stage directions" draw John deeper into the dancing, his bodily and mental responses are represented in parentheses and in open dialogue, respectively:

John: Soon the director will herd you, my full-lipped, distant beauties, and tame you, and blunt your sharp thrusts in loosely suggestive movements, appropriate to Broadway. (O dance!) Soon the audience will paint your dusk faces white, and call you beautiful. (O dance!) Soon I. . . (O dance!) I'd like. . . (92-93).

The critical reserve which runs through John's mind while his body begins to respond to the dancers becomes increasingly fragmentary. The interjection in parentheses come more often, and soon the division between mind and body breaks down:

Girls dance and sing. Men clap. The walls sing and press inward. They press the men and girls, they press John towards a center of physical ecstasy. Go to it, Baby! Fan yourself, and feed your papa! Put . . . nobody lied . . . and take . . . when they said I cried over you. No lie! The glitter and color of stacked scenes, the gilt and brass and crimson of the house, converge towards a center of physical ecstasy. John's feet and torso and his blood press in (93).

The metaphoric permeability of the walls draws all present into that "mass-heart" of black people. The ecstatic celebration of song and dance recalls the vespers of "Georgia Dusk." Perhaps the contracting

walls there is a stronger sexuality implied.<sup>6</sup> At any rate, the pressing in of walls and people does not have that constricted quality of the "box."

But John is taken into the "mass-heart" only for a moment. His critical faculties reassert themselves: "He wills thought to rid his mind of passion" (93). The warm-up period over, the rehearsal begins in earnest.

The spontaneity of the warm-up gives way to a lackluster rehearsal more in keeping with white theater: the song pitched so as not to strain the leading lady's voice, the dance paced so as not to tax the chorus. Alone among the stale dancers, Dorris "throws herself into it" (94), catching John's attention. Her physical appearance combines several images associated with black experience in the South:

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. Johns feels them. Desires her (94).

The "lemon-colored face" suggests racial dilution but recalls Carma's "mangrove-gloomed, yellow flower face" (16). The full lips suggest Dorris' sensual nature. The purple of her stockings reflect the cane-redolent dusk. In spite of himself, John is attracted to her. He accurately perceives how he must seem to Dorris and debates whether an affair with her would be worth the difficulties that would follow. To Dorris, he must seem

Dictie, educated, stuck-up. . . (94)

---

<sup>6</sup>Kousaleos, pp. 80-81, interprets the contracting walls as an attraction-repulsion metaphor.

while she would act the typical

show girl. Yep. Her suspicion would be stronger than her passion. It wouldn't work. Keep her loveliness. Let her go (94).

Sensing his attention, Dorris asks her dancing partner who he is. The partner informs her that he is

"Th manager's brother. Dictie. Nothin doin, hon."  
Dorris tosses her head and dances for him until she feels she has him. Then, withdrawing disdainfully, she flirts with the director (95).

She is indignant at the implication that she is not good enough for him. She thinks that she could have had an education, had she wished, that she knows respectable people in cities such as Philadelphia, New York, and Chicago, and that she has had affairs with men as good as John (95).

Though the story develops primarily through the device of playscript, with John and Dorris interacting emotionally and intellectually across the distance that separates them, the narrator's presence still is felt. Narrative threads connect the inner dialogue of the two main characters in such a way that the narrator's attitudes clearly come through. For example, when Dorris first notices that she has John's interest, the narrator points out that

Her own glowing is too rich a thing to let her feel the slimness of his diluted passion (94-95).

He still works at the theme of the diluted northern Negro. And as in "Avey," he equates the tendency to rationalize with diminished sexual prowess. John clearly desires Dorris, but his passion is diluted by thought. He does not want the complications of dealing with a woman who, he thinks, would drag him down into a cheap affair. Because the

playscript technique largely dispenses with the narrative point of view, the narrator seems to have withdrawn further than at any other time thus far. Only in thematic motifs and images does his presence still show through.

Dorris, as she continues to dance and draw the open admiration of all onlookers, including John, begins to echo John's doubts:

Dorris: I bet he can love. Hell, he cant love. He's too skinny. His lips are too skinny. He wouldnt love me anyway, only for that. But I'd get a pair of silk stockings out of it. Red silk. I got purple. Cut it, kid. You cant win him to respect you that away. He wouldnt anyway. Maybe he would. Maybe he'd love. I've heard em say that men who look like him (what does he look like?) will marry if they love. O will you love me? (97)

Dorris is plainly torn by doubts, by the desire to use John, and by a wish for respectability. Her thoughts fluctuate between cynicism and pleading, beyond which lies her yearning for a husband, children, and a home. Her desire for conventional happiness suddenly stiffens her resolve:

You will if I make you. Just watch me.  
 Dorris dances. She forgets her tricks. She dances.  
 Glorious songs are the muscles of her limbs.  
 And her singing is of canebrake loves and mangrove feastings.  
 The walls press in, singing. Flesh of a throbbing body,  
 they press close to John and Dorris. They close them in. John's heart beats tensely against her dancing body. Walls press his mind within his heart. And then the shaft of light goes out the window high above him. John's mind sweeps up to follow it. Mind pulls him upward into dream (98).

Ironically, in her attempt to win John over, to compel him to love her, to want to marry and provide her with family life, Dorris throws off

conventional movements and dances with fervor.<sup>7</sup> As she does so, all the old associations with the narrator's evocation of the southern Negro and his African origins project out of her movements. Her dance celebrates the lost glory of the Negro past and overwhelms the scene. Once more, as in the warm-up prior to the rehearsal, John feels the walls pressing in and the image implies his sexual excitation. Even more, the contraction of the box-like room takes on a womb-like significance, an overwhelming embrace with John and Dorris at its center.

At the climax of this ecstatic image, John pulls away into his own fantasies. The shaft of light representing his critical, reserved self vanishes and he figuratively follows it into his separate dream. The dream itself is presented as a kind of play-within-a-play, and is reproduced in the text in reduced type in order to give it a sense of greater distance from the on-going stage business:

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 towards 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 (98-99).

---

<sup>7</sup>Ellison, p. 131, and Kousaleos, p. 81, comment on Dorris' naturalness and her vitality as representative of the southern women in Part I. Mabel M. Dillard, "Jean Toomer: Herald of the Negro Renaissance" (Ohio University, 1967) unpubl. diss., p. 68, Reilly, 318, William C. Fischer, "The Aggregate Man in Jean Toomer's *Cane*," Studies in the Novel, 3 (Summer 1971) 205, Innes, 314, Scruggs, 287, and Blake 526, similarly make this point.



The scene abounds with conventional elements of sexual fantasies as are portrayed in plays and movies: the woman waits for the man, both elegantly dressed, in an atmosphere of sentimentality. But it is heavily overlaid with John's "diluted" responses. The absence of trees recalls the exploitation of southern forests, and the impression of leaves on the ground carries a sense of staleness: the rustle has been removed by frequent trodding. The odor of roasting chestnuts mingling with that of burning leaves echoes the smoldering pine sawdust of the South. But John's senses are all contained by his melancholy, except for his eyes. This exception prefigures the narrator's declaration that he has confused the external with the internal, and stirs up associations with the eye-imagery that predominates in Cane. It alludes to the tendency of the narrator to withdraw and observe before and after he affirms his racial heritage, and therefore suggests that John fades as a Negro.

More specific fragments of the Negro's southern experience persist in John's dream:

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 (99).

The sense of autumn and the canefield suggest the bloody harvest of "Blood-Burning Moon." John's sadness becomes mixed with the narrator's. Any tendency to objectivity in the narrative voice provided by the playscript technique is overridden by this dream sequence. The narrator

describes sensations which John cannot feel because his melancholy has sealed them behind a wall of sight. Thus the sweetness of the air, the absence of leaf rustle, and Dorris' perfume are things John cannot be aware of. Yet they are presented in the dream as if he is. The narrator clearly identifies with John to such an extent that John seems to be a surrogate for him.

The remainder of the dream acts as transition to John's "awakening," a return to awareness of the theater. In it, the implications of John's active pursuit of Dorris are acted out:

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. . . (99)

Within the context of this dream, John ceases to respond physically to Dorris. He becomes aware that the walls are permeated with her personality, with her seductive dancing. He withdraws further in the act of reading a manuscript, effectively shutting out the powerful influence. He finally reduces Dorris to the level of a character in a script. In so doing, John strongly identifies with the final episode of "Avey," in which the narrator expressed the hope that he could create an art for women such as Avey which would free them of the constrictions, the "boxes," of urban society. Here, John reduces Dorris to a work of art that imprisons her and thwarts her development. The womb-like theater, out of which something free might be born, becomes a trap. As a

messianic leader who might lead his people to a new understanding of themselves through a rebirth of black culture, John is a conspicuous failure. Through his dream, John joins Esther in spiritual oblivion.

The dream ended, John focuses on Dorris' dancing. Her dance ends with the dream and, as the stage applauds, Dorris looks to John for a sign that she has reached him, but

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. She rushes from the stage. Falls down the steps into her dressing-room. Pulls her hair. Her eyes, over a floor of tears, stare at the whitewashed ceiling. (Smell of dry paste, and paint, and soiled clothing." Her pal comes in. Dorris flings herself into the old safe arms, and cries bitterly. "I told you nothin doin," is what Mame says to comfort her (99-100).

With her dance, Dorris had sought to find life in John. Instead, she finds death. Unlike Avey, who fell asleep while the narrator unfolded his vision to her, Dorris unfolds the vital black heritage within her while John metaphorically sleeps. Frustrated, she rushes back to her dressing room where she stares at "the whitewashed ceiling." Unlike the "nigger life" of "Seventh Street" which splintered and fragmented the "white and whitewashed wood of Washington," injecting "black reddish blood" (71), the ceiling is remote. The stale odors linger as tokens of John's dream as well as of the "stale soggy wood of Washington" (71). Ironically, Dorris, unable to fulfill her own maternal longings, throws herself into the maternal arms of her dancing partner.

Having contemplated, in his dream, a work of art preserving Dorris in her finest moment, John fulfills his earlier fancy to "keep her loveliness. Let her go." Enshrined in a lighted box, Dorris

would live in artificial loveliness. Completely controlled by the mind of her creator, this Dorris could never turn tawdry. But neither can she develop and grow, and the flesh and blood Dorris, whose maternal instincts might have given new life to the race and to herself as a human being, is thwarted. John withdraws into a private vision which, if translated into an actual stage production, can communicate something of what the Negro was. But since he does not communicate with Dorris, does not try to fulfill her, Dorris' purpose is thwarted. Whether John will ever translate his dream into reality, and whether Dorris will ever again be able to dance with the passionate abandon with which she tried to catch him, is not revealed in the story. The failure of communication suggests failure of both possibilities. And in "Her Lips Are Copper Wire" immediately following "Theater," the narrator suggests the ultimate dehumanization of the woman of lights.

If "Avey" symbolically depicts the poet-narrator's failure to transplant the "plum-seed" of those "dusky cane-lipped throngs" from its mythic soil in "Song of the Son" and "Georgia Dusk," then "Theater" depicts the artist's failure as messianic figure. What new question, then, can "Box Seat" pose? For the title at once announces that the theater will again be an important focal point in the story.

The division of the story into two parts reflects the dual nature of the protagonist, Dan Moore: the first portrays "life," the second, "art." The narrative resembles that of "Theater," being a fusion of playscript and poetry. The opening metaphor continues to associate the box motif with the female:

Houses are shy girls whose eyes shine reticently upon the dusk body of the street. Upon the gleaming limbs and asphalt torso of a dreaming nigger. Shake your curled wool-blossoms, nigger. Open your liver lips to the lean, white spring. Stir the root-life of a withered people. Call them from their houses, and teach them to dream (104).

The allegorical process by which the narrator transforms the raw, primitive, fascinating southern black woman into a stereotyped, repressed, middle-class white effigy here reaches its fullest development. Drawing richly on the box and hive images introduced in the earlier poetry and prose, he conveys the quality of constriction they connote. The bold "brown eyes that loved without a trace of fear" (7) have become shy and reticent. The street "nigger life" that weaves through "Seventh Street," "Avey," and "Theater" becomes a personified Messiah, wooing his withdrawn people from their middle-class captivity. The narrator apostrophizes the "gleaming . . . asphalt torso of a dreaming nigger" as a virile, magnificent Negro reminiscent of King Barlo. The "dusk body" recalls the frequent references to that hour of the day when southern Negroes celebrated their freedom from white civilization. The cotton flower is displaced by chestnut blossoms, the curly, wool-like hair of the Negro. "Cane-lipped" yields to "liver lips," an ironic reference to the sensuality of thick lips in "Avey" and "Theater." And the metaphoric shower of southern soil fertilizing the "lean streets" of Washington (85) finds its counterpart in the "lean, white spring," further suggesting the barrenness of white civilization. The whole ambiance speaks of fecundity and regeneration in the form of a messianic Negro. He will reawaken the ties of the northern blacks to their southern forebears by stirring their root-life. Like a poet, he will teach them to dream.

As if the gleaming asphalt metamorphoses into human forms,  
the image begins to shift:

Dark swaying forms of Negroes are street songs that woo  
virginal houses (104).

Then from out of these generalized, shadowy forms, Dan Moore emerges.

He

walks southward on Thirteenth Street. The low limbs of budding  
chestnut trees recede above his head. Chestnut buds and blossoms  
are wool he walks upon. The eyes of houses faintly touch  
him as he passes them. Soft girl-eyes, they set him to singing.  
Girl-eyes within him widen upward to promised faces. Floating  
away, they dally wistfully over the dusk body of the street (104).

As with the narrative point of view in "Theater," the narrator strongly  
identifies with a male protagonist even though he, himself, is not  
present. The opening allegory undergoes subtle changes in Dan's mind,  
and the dream becomes slightly more explicit. Dan dreams of the girls  
more directly as sex objects, and in an interesting debasement of the  
original image, walks on the wool which formerly graced the head of  
the dreaming "nigger." Perhaps this nuance merely clarifies that the  
"wool-blossoms" of the "nigger" have fallen from the chestnut trees,  
and that they should not be thought of as still clinging to them. Such  
an image would then convey the tardiness of the wooer. And this inter-  
pretation accords with the apparent unattainability of the "girl-eyes."  
They beckon to Dan and seem to lure him on, yet they float away. Dally-  
ing wistfully "over the dusk body of the street," they seem to call  
encouragement to him:

Come on, Dan Moore, come on (104).

Dan tries to sing, but his hoarse voice cracks and jars against the loveliness of the images formed in his mind. He would like to produce tones that would complement them, but he strains and fails. When he turns to whistling, instead, he finds the notes shrill and painful (104-105). This much of the narrative deftly conveys an important quality in Dan's character, that his is a poetic nature destined to be frustrated through his ineptitude. In a way, he is like John, whose dream of Dorris reveals to him the incongruity of his own condition, or like the narrator of "Avey," whose art would free black women of the hive-like restraints of white civilization but bores the woman for whom it is meant.

As Dan thinks about his destination, the images in his mind begin to assume more specific shape:

Dan thinks of the house he's going to. Of the girl. Lips, flesh-notes of a forgotten song, plead with him. . . (105)

The girl in his mind grows out of the fragments of the shy girls whose eyes beckon him onward. His imagination focuses on her lips which are music made visual. But the song they represent is forgotten in his ancestral past. Only the pleading remains. When Dan nears his destination, he

. . . turns into a side-street, opens an iron gate, bangs it to. Mounts the steps, and searches for the bell. Funny, he cant find it. He fumbles around. The thought comes to him that some one passing by might see him, and not understand. Might think that he is trying to sneak, to break in (105).

Dan's act of banging the gate to suggests impatience which, by itself, might seem natural enough. But when he searches for the bell, a deeper malaise appears. His fear that passersby might mistake his intentions becomes more than a momentary doubt.

Balked by a serious obstacle to his desire to go into the house smoothly and without fuss, and thwarted from reaching his love-object, Dan's impatience turns into hostility:

Dan: Break in. Get an ax and smash in. Smash in their faces. I'll show em. Break into an engine-house, steal a thousand horsepower fire truck. Smash in with the truck. I'll show em. Grab an ax and brain em. Cut em up. Jack the Ripper. Baboon from the zoo. And then the cops come. "No, I aint a baboon. I aint Jack the Ripper. I'm a poor man out of work. Take your hands off me, you bull-necked bears. 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 (105-06).

The violence of Dan's thoughts are out of all proportion to his difficulty. Nor is it fully prepared for by his earlier impatience over the hoarseness of his voice or the shrillness of his whistling. But it does build on deeper associations with the Negro condition, with a sense of injustice unredressed, with the conviction that, if he were arrested for some act of violence, he would be treated as sub-human. His fantasy borrows from Esther's dream and "Seventh Street." Dan is motivated by a desire to answer his girl's pleading lips, to save her from some not fully recognized imprisonment, just as Esther wanted to "rescue" King Barlo from his hangers-on. And the thought of breaking into the house recalls the "crude-boned, soft-skinned wedge of nigger life . . . thrusting unconscious rhythms . . . into the white and whitewashed wood of Washington," but with almost incoherent rage added. The "wedge" becomes an ax, the "Split it! In two! Again!" becomes "smash in. Smash in their faces." The violence of "Seventh Street," generalized into an attack on a symbol of white civilization, becomes humanized in Dan: he wants to attack people.



In denying the labels which an uncomprehending society would pin on him for his imaginary acts of destruction, Dan declares that he has been touched by Jesus. Significantly, he was born in a canefield which metaphorically becomes the black's equivalent to the manger. Dan clearly takes on himself the burden of stirring "the root-life of a withered people" and thus becomes a victim of the visionary madness that has thwarted every attempt by the characters of Cane to break through conventional limits to some dimly perceived objective. Perhaps Dan comes closest to realizing the need for a leader to inspire his people. At least, his vision is not as incapacitating as Esther's, the only other that focused as clearly on the messianic role. But Dan's capacity to act is diminished by his distraught frame of mind:

Some one might think he is trying to break in. He'd better knock. His knuckles are raw bone against the thick glass door. He waits. No one comes. Perhaps they havent 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 dont want to let him in. He knocks. The tension of his arms makes the glass rattle. Hurried steps come towards him. The door opens.

"Please, you might break the glass--the bell--oh, Mr. Moore! I thought it must be some stranger" (106).

Dan has trouble acting prudently. Distraught by his fear that his behavior will be misunderstood, he behaves exactly in a way that will be mistaken. He bangs at the door so peremptorily that the woman who answers, Mrs. Pribby, the landlady, thinks that it must be someone unfamiliar with the location of the bell. Her immediate recognition of Dan indicates that he is a frequent visitor, and hence he ought to

know where the bell is. That he could not find it shows how far his frustration has gone. His imagining gorillas in the shadows on the glass also reveals an uneasiness about zoo monsters and underscores his earlier statement that the world is "sick."

Mrs. Pribby invites Dan in and calls Muriel, his girl, and as she stands for a moment to exchange amenities, the narrator interprets the eyes that look at Dan:

Her eyes are weak. They are bluish and water from reading newspapers. The blue is steel. It gimlets Dan while her mouth flaps amiably to him (107).

These eyes have a coldness reminiscent of the "blue-sheen God with listless eyes" (9) that gazed at Becky's exile. They also allude to the industrial encroachment on the agrarian paradise so often depicted in Cane. That the weakness of Mrs. Pribby's eyes implies more than literal vision emerges in the steel that impales Dan. Mrs. Pribby's eyes are indeed strong in their absorption of conventional attitudes from newspapers, but they are also hardened to inner vision.

Dan's contempt for Mrs. Pribby, revealed in a little fantasy of derision and hostility, emphasizes her inner blindness:

Dan: Nothing for you to see, old mussel-head. Dare I show you? If I did, delirium would furnish you headlines for a month. Now look here. Thats enough. Go long, woman. Say some nasty thing and I'll kill you. Huh. Better damned sight not. Ta-ta, Mrs. Pribby (107).

This inner monologue also emphasizes Dan's hatred for conventional attitudes, epitomized in Mrs. Pribby. The image of steel that has worked itself into Mrs. Pribby's eyes symbolizes the industrial encroachment on her soul. The image is further developed as 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. Dan's eyes sting. Sinking into a soft couch, he closes them. The house contracts about him. It is a sharp-edged, massed, metallic house. Bolted. About Mrs. Pribby. Bolted to the endless rows of metal houses. Mrs. Pribby's house. The rows of houses belong to other Mrs. Pribbys. No wonder he couldn't sing to them (107).

The steel that impales Dan becomes for him the symbol of imprisonment. The houses all bolted together close in upon him. Unlike the Howard Theater which enabled Dorris to "sing" through her dance, these houses prevent Dan from expressing himself.

But Dan is not concerned for himself only. He wonders why Muriel lives in such a place, and what effect it might have on her. His thoughts fastened on Muriel, he wonders what she is doing as he waits, imagines her putting on stockings in the bathroom, then sharply calls his imagination away out of respect for Muriel's privacy. For such an erratic, even violent man, Dan's imagination shows surprising tact. Thinking that he would rather listen than peep,

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 waters where huge bubbles burst. . . (108)

This entire image ironically recalls Rhobert's sinking into the mud wearing his house like a diver's helmet. That sinking, too, was attended by a figure of redemption, ". . . a Red Cross man with a dredge and a respiration-pump" (74). And Rhobert's bubble-like helmet threatened

to burst under pressure. In Dan's image, not only one house sinks, perhaps because the community is bolted together. So many bubbles bursting will make it hard for the new Christ to walk on the water, a suggestion that Dan has much self-doubt about his role as messianic figure. But through the turmoil of Dan's mind, this image is also affirmative. The rising of the new Christ at the head of the "powerful underground races" strongly suggests the renewal of the black race. Indeed, the use of the plural, "races," suggests that Dan is thinking of all suppressed peoples.

Dan's messianic dream is broken off by the footsteps announcing Muriel. Dan feigns interest in a stack of jazz sheet music at the piano, apparently to avoid being discovered with his ear to the wall. Again, his conventional behavior seems at odds with his nature. Up to this point, Dan's thoughts tend to create the impression that Muriel and he have some understanding. Given such a perspective, her greeting is surprisingly cool and perfunctory:

"Hello, Dan, stranger, what brought you here?"

Muriel comes in, shakes hands, and then clicks into a high-armed seat under the orange glow of a floor-lamp. Her face is fleshy. It would tend to coarseness but for the fresh fragrant something which is the life of it. Her hair like an Indian's. But more curly and bushed and vagrant. Her nostrils flare. The flushed ginger of her cheeks is touched orange by the shower of color from the lamp (108-09).

Muriel brings a fresh perspective to the scene, though in welcoming Dan so coolly and "clicking" into the chair she echoes Mrs. Pribby.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup>Dillard, p. 70, is among the earliest to comment on the pervasiveness of Mrs. Pribby's mentality.

the orange glow of the floor-lamp falling on her from above recalls John as he sat in the theater, his face half orange. The description of her face reveals that there is still much beauty and vitality in it. And since Toomer so often uses external appearances to reflect inner state, these are also inner qualities of beauty and vitality to which Dan obviously responds. If her behavior partly suggests Mrs. Pribby's, her physical description indicates that she had not yet been fully mastered by it.

Still making polite conversation, Muriel repeats her question regarding the purpose of Dan's visit. But

Dan feels the pressure of the house, of the rear room, of the rows of houses, shift to Muriel. He is light. He loves her. He is doubly heavy (109).

The psychological atmosphere which made his voice crack when he tried to sing to the houses, and made his whistling shrill, now works its way into his mind in the presence of Muriel. He becomes confused between his love for her and his hatred for the Mrs. Pribby mentality which permeates the background and works into his own mind. It contaminates his feelings for Muriel, and causes him to fumble in his speech as he earlier fumbled at the door for the bell. Clumsily, he says that he has come to make amends for some previous blunder with Muriel, the nature of which can only be guessed at from the context (109). Dan's violence in the face of confusion can readily supply possibilities. That Muriel found the experience painful emerges in her refusal to discuss the matter. Dan protests:

But Muriel, life is full of things like that. One grows strong and beautiful in facing them" (109).

His plea for communication is significant, supplying an important index to his character. Equally significant is Muriel's conventional turning aside and attempting to bury what is painful. She changes the subject, mentioning that she is going to a show at the Lincoln Theater that night with a friend, Bernice. Again, Dan makes the conventional gesture of starting to leave in order not to detain Muriel.

Apparently, Muriel is not sure of her feelings toward Dan, for though she greets him coolly enough, she does not dismiss him even when he presents her with an uncomplicated opportunity to do so. Throughout the balance of the scene, both she and Dan show the divided attitudes that lead to confusion as they try to find congruencies in each other that will allow them to continue their relationship. When Dan starts to leave, Muriel detains him by saying that there is still time until Bernice arrives. This uncertain invitation to stay produces an awkward silence punctuated by the rustling of Mrs. Pribby's newspaper. That Muriel did not detain Dan out of mere politeness becomes apparent from her thoughts:

Muriel: Shame about Dan. Something awfully good and fine about him. But he don't fit in. In where? Me? Dan, I could love you if I tried. I dont have to try. I do. O Dan, dont you know I do? Timid lover, brave talker that you are. Whats the good of all you know if you dont know that? I wont let myself. I? Mrs. Pribby who reads newspapers all night wont. What has she got to do with me? She is me, somehow. No she's not. Yes she is. She is the town, and the town wont let me love you, Dan. Dont you know? You could make it let me if you would. Why wont you? Youre selfish. I'm not strong enough to buck it. Youre too selfish to buck it, for me. I wish you'd go. You irritate me. Dan, please go (110).

Muriel clearly delays Dan's departure because she hopes that he will yet act to clear up her confusion about him. Dan's hostility in the face of

seemingly trivial frustrations becomes more clearly motivated through Muriel's inner monologue. As long as the narrative point of view centered so completely in Dan's thoughts, very little of his real indecisiveness could be revealed because in his own mind Dan believes himself to be the bringer of a new order.<sup>9</sup> Muriel is hardly a disinterested source of information about Dan. Obviously, her feelings for Dan are torn between a desire to have him forcefully make love to her and her fear of the community. For all his fancies about being a new leader, Dan does not realize that he might succeed with Muriel if he would only act decisively.

Instead, he talks. He rationalizes and intellectualizes. In the absence of any real attempt to assert himself, he leaves himself open to Muriel's conventional criticisms of his shiftlessness. The would-be innovator is thus reduced to petty skirmishes about getting a job and settling down. But beyond the superficial exchanges of well-worn arguments, Muriel's inner qualities speak to Dan:

Dan looks at her, directly. Her animalism, still unconquered by zoo-restrictions and keeper-taboos, stirs him. Passion tilts upward, bringing with it elements of an old desire. Muriel's lips become the flesh-notes of a futile, plaintive longing. Dan's impulse to direct her is its fresh life (112).

---

<sup>9</sup>Because the commentators tend to emphasize Muriel's failure to break away from Mrs. Pribby, they tend to minimize Dan's immersion in an "unrealistic" evaluation of himself. Kousaleos, p. 83, does comment on Dan's "paranoia" as he fumbles for the doorbell, and Michael Jay Krasny, "Jean Toomer and the Quest for Consciousness" (University of Wisconsin, 1972) unpubl. diss., p. 72, also points out character flaws.

This narrative glimpse into Dan's mind throws new light on several aspects of his character. First, it reveals that what offended Dan in his thought that he might be a "baboon from the zoo" was that association with the zoo and not necessarily the comparison with a baboon. The animalism which he senses in Muriel excites him both sexually and intellectually. The "zoo-restrictions," i.e., the rows of bolted houses and the Pribby mentalities, offend him. Then, the natural, spontaneous music of Muriel's lips inspires him with a desire to shape and direct it. That might seem to contradict his mistrust of "keeper-taboos," except that he really objects to conventional controls. Apparently, he mistrusts natural form, for he seems to want to improve on it. Finally, like the narrator of "Avey," Dan wishes to give Muriel's "futile, plaintive longing" a new life. This possibility for new life in Muriel is clearly related to the rising of the "powerful underground races."

But Dan fails to realize that he must act. He buries animal impulses in a pile of philosophical fragments. Seizing on Muriel's haphazard comment that she had tried to make people happy, Dan interrupts:

"Happy Muriel? No, not happy. Your aim is wrong. 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. No one should want to. Perfect joy, or perfect pain, with no contrasting element to define them, would mean a monotony of consciousness, would mean death. Not happy, Muriel. Say that you have tried to make them create. Say that you have used your own capacity for life to cradle them. To start them upward-flowing. Or if you cant say that you have, then say that you will. My talking to you will make you aware of your power to do so. Say that you will love, that you will give yourself in love--" (112-113).



Though Dan cannot resist preaching to Muriel, his words are still passionate. They are full of metaphoric renewal, as the emphasis on "create," "cradle," and "upward-flowing" suggests. But these terms are also abstractions for sexual desire. The word, "love," and Dan's urging Muriel to give herself in love, seems to be so explicit that when Muriel interrupts,

"To you, Dan?" (113)

her question appears eager for a declaration. At this question, Dan's intellectual reserve breaks down. The abstractions vanish:

Dan's consciousness crudely swerves into his passions. They flare up in his eyes. They set up quivers in his abdomen. He is suddenly over-tense and nervous (113).

At this crucial moment, Dan seems to falter. As he speaks Muriel's name, the rustling of Mrs. Pribby's newspaper in the background interrupts him. He begins again, and from what follows, plainly more than Dan's will, or Muriel's, is at work:

"Muriel--"

Dan rises. His arms stretch towards her. His fingers and his palms, pink in the lamp-light, are glowing irons. Muriel's chair is close and stiff about her. The house, the rows of houses locked about her chair. Dan's fingers and arms are fire to melt and bars to wrench and force and pry. Her arms hang loose. Her hands are hot and moist. Dan takes them. He slips to his knees before her.

"Dan, you mustnt."

"Muriel--"

"Dan, really you mustnt. No, Dan. No" (113).

The woman who only a few minutes before was thinking to herself that Dan was a timid lover is now confronted with a man on fire for her. The pink color of Dan's hands in the lamplight gives his gesture of reaching out to Muriel an aura of artificiality, as did the pink in "Esther"

and "Theater." Muriel seems to be trapped in her chair by the crushing force of the community which she senses beyond Dan's passion. The sensuality of the metaphor of Dan's fingers and arms as instruments to break the bonds of the community within her, momentarily succeed. Muriel is limp before Dan's heat. But when Dan takes her hands and falls to his knees, Muriel stiffens her resistance. Pleading that Mrs. Pribby may come in at any moment and discover them, Muriel begs off. When Dan suggests that they go out, Muriel refuses and insists that Dan release her (113-14).

When Muriel tries to free herself,

Dan tightens his grip. He feels the strength of his fingers. His muscles are tight and strong. He stands up. Thrusts out his chest. Muriel shrinks from him. Dan becomes aware of his crude absurdity. His lips curl. His passion chills. He has an obstinate desire to possess her (114).

Dan's spontaneous passion turns into an exercise of will. When his intellect catches up with his emotions, he realizes the absurdity of his situation. But unlike the earlier moments when his sensitivity overcame his cruder impulses, this time he hardens his resolve:

"Muriel, I love you. I want you, whatever the world of Pribby says. Damn your Pribby. Who is she to dictate my love? I've stood enough of her. Enough of you. Come here" (114).

He presses Muriel so hard that her resistance makes her face "hot and blue and moist. Ugly" (114). His brutality prompts Muriel to ask what he is killing. Dan's answer channels his hostility into a definitive statement:

"Whats weak in both of us and a whole litter of Pribbys. For once in your life youre going to face whats real, by God--" (115)

Dan turns his assault on Muriel into a symbolic attack on Mrs. Pribby. But by this time, the struggle in the parlor has finally drawn a sharp rebuttal from Mrs. Pribby. With "a sharp rap on the newspaper in the rear room" (115) Mrs. Pribby exercises a decisive control:

The rap is like cool thick glass between them. Dan is hot on one side. Muriel, hot on the other. They straighten. Gaze fearfully at one another. Neither moves. A clock in the rear room, in the rear room, the rear room, strikes eight. Eight slow, cool sounds. Bernice. Muriel fastens on her image. She smooths her dress. She adjusts her skirt. She becomes prim and cool (115).

All of Dan's defiance of convention, and especially of Mrs. Pribby, comes to naught. Muriel's earlier prophecy, that Mrs. Pribby would not allow Dan to force her to love him, proves correct. Mrs. Pribby clearly emerges the victor, even from her remote observation post.

Like the measured, mechanical coolness of the clock, Muriel maneuvers herself out of the room and out of reach of Dan. Yet she pauses to smile at him from "the landing of the steps that lead upstairs" (115). Dan adjusts his own appearance, and puts on his coat and hat:

He moves towards Muriel. Muriel steps backward up one step. Dan's jaw shoots out. Muriel jerks her arm in warning of Mrs. Pribby. She gasps and turns and starts to run. Noise of a chair scraping as Mrs. Pribby rises from it, ratchets down the hall. Dan stops. He makes a wry face, wheels round, goes out, and slams the door (115-16).

The movement toward Muriel is undoubtedly a conciliatory gesture. With his outer wear on, Dan clearly prepares to leave. But Muriel's response shows distrust, and apparently that last blow to Dan's ego is about to bring an angry rebuttal. Muriel makes a fuss that brings Mrs. Pribby down the hall. Both Muriel and Dan retreat before this charge. So

ends the first attempt of the "dreaming nigger" to breach the boxes of "shy girls" and "stir the root-life of a withered people."

Shifting from the "real" world of the Pribby house to the "dream" world of the Lincoln Theater, the second part of "Box Seat" extends the symbolic meaning of houses "bolted to endless rows of metal houses" to the theater seats in which the audience willingly imprisons itself. The narrative point of view shifts omnisciently from the opening lines, briefly sketching in snatches of conversation as people file into place, to Muriel's thoughts as she and Bernice come in. They make an incongruous couple:

. . . Bernice . . . is a cross between a washerwoman and a blue-blood lady, a washer-blue, a washer-lady. . . . Muriel has on an orange dress. Its color would clash with the crimson box-draperies, its color would contradict the sweet rose smile her face is bathed in, should she take her coat off. She'll keep it on. Pale purple shadows rest on the planes of her cheeks. Deep purple comes from her thick-shocked hair. Orange of the dress goes well with these. Muriel presses her coat down from around her shoulders (116).

The narrator's characterization of Bernice seems to be heavy-handed satire, while his description of Muriel shows her complete preoccupation with appearances. Despite her concern with superficial aesthetics, the purple associations of her racial heritage still cling to her cheeks and hair. Muriel even decides to keep her hat on because "teachers are not supposed to have bobbed hair" (116). Muriel takes a chair that places her eyes almost level with a hypothetical man on stage, and she points out a seat to Bernice directly behind her.

The narrator repeats the opening lines of conversational fragments, varied slightly. But as the people continue to come in, he

introduces the image of bolts shooting into a slot. The "click" of Mrs. Pribby and of Muriel as they fitted into chairs at home takes on added meaning in the theater as people are locked into place. The narrator poses ominous questions:

Suppose the Lord should ask, where was Moses when the light went out? Suppose Gabriel should blow his trumpet! (117)

The first question implies that Moses would be in no position to lead these people locked into their seats, while the second, that they could not respond to the trumpet of doom. And yet the seats are mindlessly filled:

The seats are slots. The seats are bolted houses. The mass grows denser. Its weight at first is impalpable upon the box. Then Muriel begins to feel it. She props her arm against the brass box-rail, to ward it off. Silly. These people are friends of hers: a parent of a child she teaches, an old school friend. She smiles at them. They return her courtesy, and she is free to chat with Berny (117).

The oppressive conformity of the seats and the people in them begins to work subtly on Muriel's mind. Muriel dismisses the impression and rationalizes her relationship with the people in the theater. Her conventional greetings are conventionally returned. The passage has some of the pathetic sinking of Rhobert under the weight of his house.

Superficially content with her appearance and the presence of her acquaintances, Muriel is agitated within:

Muriel: Never see Dan again. He makes me feel queer. Starts things he doesnt finish. Upsets me. I am not upset. I am perfectly calm. I am going to enjoy the show. Good show. I've had some show! This damn tame thing. O Dan. Wont see Dan again. Not alone. Have Mrs. Pribby come in. She was in. Keep Dan out. If I love him, can I keep him out? Well then, I dont love him. Now he's out. Who is that coming in? Blind as a bat. Ding-bat. Looks like Dan. He mustnt see me. Silly. He cant reach me. He wont dare come in here. He'd put his head down like a goring bull and charge me. He'd trample them. He'd gore. He'd rape! Berny! He won't dare come in here (117-18).

Muriel can only come to grips with her desires about Dan in the company of other people. Yet she is not entirely secure in the feeling that they really can protect her. She plainly cannot make up her mind about him. Compared to her experience with him, the show she has come to see will be tame. As Muriel vacillates between seeing or not seeing him again, Dan actually comes into the theater. At first, she cannot be sure that it is he because she cannot see very well. Alarmed in her imagination at what Dan might be capable of, Muriel asks "Berny" to identify him because she does not have her glasses. The play on "seeing" ironically identifies her with the weak-eyed Mrs. Pribby, but the play on "glasses" has larger significance: glass acts as a motif of faulty vision both literally and figuratively, and as a barrier to communication. Glass creates a cool, thick barrier between Muriel and Dan in the first part of "Box Seat"; glass filters daylight onto John's face and represents his critical reserve; glass is the barrier through which Ned wants to throw a brick and assert himself with Avey; glass forms the screen against which Esther projects her pathetic vision of the Messiah, and a glassy sheet of darkened ice shuts out impressions which might deter her from visiting King Barlo.

When Bernice has confirmed Muriel's uncertain vision, the narrator focuses on Dan. His entrance typically underscores his ineptitude and fumbling:

Dan is ushered down the aisle. He has to squeeze past the knees of seated people to reach his own seat. He treads on a man's corns. The man grumbles, and shoves him off. He shrivels close beside a portly Negress whose huge rolls of flesh meet about the bones of seat-arms (118-19).

Embarrassed at having stepped on the man's corns, Dan fits incongruously into his seat beside the almost grotesquely fat lady. But the woman is extraordinary to Dan for another reason:

A soil-soaked fragrance comes from her. Through the cement floor her strong roots sink down. They spread under the asphalt streets. Dreaming, the streets roll over on their bellies, and such their glossy health from them. Her strong roots sink down and spread under the river and disappear in blood-lines that waver south. Her roots shoot down (119).

This woman represents a great Earth Mother whose powerful roots are not deterred by concrete. She has the deep roots that ultimately trace back to the ancestral home of the Negro, and therefore can sustain the "dreaming nigger" streets. Spellbound, Dan begins to dream:

Dan's hands follow them. Roots throb. Dan's heart beats violently. He places his palms upon the earth to cool them. Earth throbs. Dan's heart beats violently. He sees all the people in the house rush to the walls to listen to the rumble. A new-world Christ is coming up. Dan comes up. He is startled. The eyes of the woman dont belong to her. They look at him unpleasantly. From either aisle, bolted masses press in. He doesnt fit (119).

Dan senses the power of the roots metaphorically through his hands. His placing his palms against the earth to cool them recalls the strange peace experienced by Bob Stone as he lay in the canefield. The throbbing of the roots and of the earth seems connected to the beating of his heart, and in his imagination, he forgets that people are bolted into their seats and could not respond even if they were aware of rumbling earth. Once more, Dan visualizes the Messiah who will lead the black people. Already linked in his thoughts with the new-world Christ, Dan seems to rise up with him. But Dan comes up out of his reverie to find the woman glaring at him.

As with the narrator of "Fern," Dan seems to have done something with his hands of which he is unaware. Perhaps as he felt the roots and the earth in his reverie, he actually made some movement or touched the woman. Discomfitted, he begins to feel the weight of the "bolted masses." He realizes that he is out of place. The Madonna-figure whose roots seemed to penetrate the impervious floor proves chimerical, and the walls close in around him like a box. As curtain time nears,

the mass grows agitant. For an instant, Dan's and Muriel's eyes meet. His weight there slides the weight on her. She braces an arm against the brass rail, and turns her head away (119).

Muriel still has mixed feelings about Dan, but the psychological weight he briefly shifts to her angers her and makes her wish that someone would take a horse-whip to him. Muriel's wish for violence is to have ironic fulfillment.

When the performance has finally gotten under way, Dan finds it stale, boring, and he believes that Muriel would agree. But because it is expected,

she'll smile and she'll clap. Do what youre bid, you she-slave. Look at her. Sweet, tame woman in a brass box seat. Clap, smile, fawn, clap. Do what youre bid. Drag me in with you. Dirty me. Prop me in your brass box seat. I'm there, am I not? because of you. He-slave. Slave of a woman who is a slave. I'm a damned sight worse than you are. I sing your praises, Beauty! I exalt thee, O Muriel! A slave, thou art greater than all Freedom because I love thee (121).

Dan resents Muriel's submissiveness but praises her beauty. In a way, he practices what the narrator of "Fern" first expressed, that "men are pat to idolize or fear that which they cannot understand, especially



if it be a woman" (26). He elevates Muriel to the status of goddess, but he derives little joy from his worship. He feels that he debases himself in worshipping a goddess who is herself a slave. Yet he willingly proclaims himself a slave of a slave and considers himself worse than she. The inner discomfort brought on by boredom with the show and his desire to express his love for Muriel causes him to fidget and disturb his neighbors. The man with the corns pointedly tells Dan to keep still. Dan's response almost starts a fight with him.

The introduction of another act on stage brings a temporary lull in the heated exchange between the two men. Actually, this act has special interest for the story's theme:

Dwarfs, dressed like prize-fighters, foreheads bulging like boxing gloves, are led upon the stage. They are going to fight for the heavy-weight championship. Gruesome. Dan glances at Muriel. He imagines that she shudders. His mind curves back into himself, and picks up tail-ends of experiences. His eyes are open, mechanically. The dwarfs pound and bruise and bleed each other, on his eyeballs (122-23).

Grotesque, deformed, these creatures suggest the stunted condition of Dan and Muriel and, in a larger sense, that of the black race. But their significance is lost on Dan, whose eyes focus on them mechanically while actually contemplating fragments out of his past. The emphasis the narrator gives to the dwarfs' fighting on Dan's eyeballs suggests that they are creatures on other worlds, the eyeballs representing globes. The fact that they are fighting on the surface, as it were, without really being seen by Dan, further plays on the theme of seeing and vision.

While Dan reminisces about Muriel, feminism, and an old Negro who had been born a slave, the dwarfs begin to fight in earnest:

Dan: Ah, but she was some baby! And not vulgar either. Funny how some women can do those things. Muriel dancing like that! Hell. She rolled and wobbled. Her buttocks rocked. She pulled up her dress and showed her pink drawers. Baby! And then she caught my eyes. Dont know what my eyes had in them. Yes I do. God, dont I though! Sometimes I think, Dan Moore, that your eyes could burn clean . . . burn clean . . BURN CLEAN! . . (123)

Dan's recollection of a moment when he surprises Muriel free of the taboos of the Pribby mentality reveals the sensual delight she is capable of. But more than sensuality, the pink drawers suggests the element of unreality, of self-deception carried over from the allusions to pink in "Esther," and "Theater." Dan seems quite prepared to deceive himself on two points: that Muriel's behavior was not vulgar, which it blatantly was, and that he did not know what Muriel saw in his eyes. In the first instance, Dan's description adequately reveals what is conventionally understood by the term, "vulgar," though why a man who protests against conventional attitudes should be concerned about the term is not clear. On several occasions, Dan shows a surprisingly conventional attitude. Perhaps the simplest explanation is that Dan basically is a conventional man trying to rebel against his nature. This possibility shows up in the second instance of self-deception, that he wished to deny the lust in his eyes as he watched Muriel dance. In this case, he admits to himself afterward what must have been there. Yet as soon as he admits the idea, he pulls back and tries to purify his eyes or his sight by "burning clean." He behaved similarly when he imagined himself peeping at Muriel in the bathroom.

But his desire to purify need not mean that he merely wants to return to conventional morality. For a moment, the ringing of the gong between rounds draws his attention to the stage. Up to this point, the dwarfs have been sparring playfully. But a chance blow starts the fighting in earnest. In the grotesquerie of the dwarfs being fanned and sponged off between rounds, the bulging gloves seem to be faces (123).

In the second reminiscence, however, his attitude toward feminism sounds quite conventional:

Dan: Those silly women arguing feminism. Here's what I should have said to them. "It should be clear to you women, that the proposition must be stated thus:

Me, horizontally above her

Action: perfect strokes downward oblique.

Hence, man dominates because of limitation.

Or, so it shall be until women learn their stuff.

So framed, the proposition is a mental-filler, Dentist, I want gold teeth. It should become cherished of the technical intellect. I hereby offer it to posterity as one of the important machine-age designs. P.S. It should be noted, that because it is an achievement of this age, its growth and hence its causes, up to the point of maturity, antedate machinery. Ery . . ." [sic] (123-24)

The "proposition," mixing male supremacy with the sexual act, becomes a "mental-filler" for empty heads whose cavities are thus filled with golden thoughts. As a pun, the image works well enough. But what follows it in the postscript is nonsense. Perhaps the repetition of the last three letters of the word, "machinery," makes a satiric little thrust at malfunctioning machinery, such as a phonograph stuck in a groove. Perhaps, too, the repetition of "ery" suggests "error." In any case, the contempt for the feminist movement expressed by Dan is abundantly clear.

Meanwhile, another ring on the gong draws Dan's attention once again to boxing dwarfs. They fight cruelly, viciously:

They kick and spit and bite. They pound each other furiously. Muriel pounds. The house pounds. Cut lips. Bloody noses. The referee asks for the gong. Time! The house roars. The dwarfs bow, are made to bow. The house wants more. The dwarfs are led from the stage (125).

The reaction of Muriel and the house to the exhibition of grotesque savagery provides a commentary on their imprisonment in the seats. Muriel's hostility toward Dan, his mixed hostility toward her, toward the man with the corns, and the hostility of that man and the great Negress, all are bizarrely parodied in the dwarfs. Only, they are free to act. The barriers of convention restrict the hostile fantasies of the house. But in their pounding approval of the dwarfs, we may suspect more than polite applause.

Dan sinks into a third reminiscence:

Dan: 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. He saw Grant and Lincoln. He saw Walt-- old man, did you see Walt Whitman? Did you see Walt Whitman! 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 . . . (125-126)

Here again is an incident stressing the need for the modern Negro to find ties with old slave tradition of the South. Dan's thoughts fill

with commonplaces of that past: snatches of Negro spirituals, the Negro religion, the great figures of the Civil War. Dan also thinks of the marvels of the technological age coming into being, and here he sounds strangely positive about them, when one considers that references to industrial incursions into agrarian areas are not usually portrayed with favor in Cane. Perhaps to conceive of someone present at the inception of an era, before its dangers are fully realized, is to rise above those dangers in fancy.

But the real point of the memory appears in the last nine sentences. These allude to the assumption that a survivor of the old days must have special insights bordering on the miraculous. Apparently, with his usual ineptitude, Dan raised a stir in the way he asked questions of the old man. Or, perhaps, the old man was Dan's source of inspiration for the mythic idea of the new-world Christ.

Lost in a memory so near to his heart, Dan is annoyed when the applause brings his attention back to the stage. The house demands more from the dwarfs, and Mr. Barry, "the champion," consents to sing one of his own songs. Holding "a fresh white rose, and a small mirror," Mr. Barry "wipes blood from his nose" and signals the orchestra leader to begin. He sings a sentimental love song, addressing himself to one girl after another in the audience, and holding the mirror so that it flashes in the face of the one he sings to (126). Dan once more sinks into fantasy, but this time it refers to the performance on stage:

Dan: I am going to reach up and grab the girders of this building and pull them down. The crash will be a signal. Hid by the dust and smoke Dan Moore will arise. In his right hand will be

a dynamo. In his left, a god's face that will flash white light from ebony. I'll grab a girder and swing it like a walking-stick. Lightning will flash. I'll grab its black knob and swing it like a crippled cane. Lightning . . . Some one's flashing . . . some one's flashing . . . Who in hell is flashing that mirror? Take it off me, godam [sic] you (126-27).

His annoyance and boredom take the form of a dream in which he, like Samson, will bring a heathen temple down onto Philistines. Then out of the debris he will arise, phoenix-like. And finally, like a king invested with the symbols of authority and power, he will wield a dynamo in his right hand and bear the face of a black god in his left. In this way, Dan seems to unite the spirit of the black people with the technology of the white. The girder which he will brandish like a club takes the shape of "a crippled cane," a metaphor for cane in the conventional zigzag of lightning. Thus Dan puns on cane as walking-stick and as symbol of black experience.

The flashing lightning in the fantasy becomes the mirror of the dwarf flashing light directly into Dan's eyes. Significantly, it is a glass that half blinds Dan. After tormenting Dan by playing the light into his eyes wherever he tried to avoid it, and to the great delight of the audience, Mr. Barry turns to Muriel:

Muriel is too close. Mr. Barry covers his mirror. He sings to her. She shrinks away. Nausea. She clutches the brass box-rail. She moves to face away. The audience is square upon her. Its eyes smile. Its hands itch to clap. Muriel turns to the dwarf and forces a smile at him. With a showy blare of orchestration, the song comes to a close. Mr. Barry bows. He offers Muriel the rose, first having kissed it. Blood of his battered lips is a vivid stain upon its petals. Mr. Barry offers Muriel the rose. The house applauds. Muriel flinches back (127).

Ironically, what torments Dan does not torment Muriel. Considerately covering his glass, the dwarf himself torments Muriel. Like Dan, she

tries to escape facing him, but she is bolted into her seat. Dan is blinded, but Muriel must face the dwarf directly: Dan who courts visions, and Muriel who will not face them. The implications of the white rose stained with the blood of a stunted, grotesque man build on the earlier images of the black race symbolically deformed.

To Muriel, the dwarf's insistence that she accept the rose seems threatening:

Hate pops from his eyes and crackles like a brittle heat about the box. The thick hide of his face is drawn in tortured wrinkles. Above his eyes, the bulging, tight-skinned brow (128).

But when Dan looks at the brow,

It grows calm and massive. It grows profound. It is a thing of wisdom and tenderness, of suffering and beauty. Dan looks down. The eyes are calm and luminous. Words come from them . . . Arms of the audience reach out, grab Muriel, and hold her there. Claps are steel fingers that manacle her wrists and move them forward to acceptance (128).

Looking at the same man at the same time, Muriel and Dan see two quite different entities. For Muriel, the texture of the skin and the shape of the brow connote hatred, ugliness, and nausea. For Dan, the forehead reveals wisdom, tenderness, and beauty developing out of suffering. For a man who aspires to be a leader of his people, such an insight is indispensable. For Muriel, who shuns the blackness of her past for the white middle class, such an insight is unbearable.

As Dan and Muriel look at him,

Words form in the eyes of the dwarf:

Do not shrink. Do not be afraid of me.  
Jesus  
 See how my eyes look at you.  
the Son of God  
 I too was made in His image.  
was once--  
 I give you the rose.

Muriel, tight in her revulsion, sees black, and daintily reaches for the offering. As her hand touches it, Dan springs up in his seat and shouts:

"JESUS WAS ONCE A LEPER!" (129)

Dan, reading the message in the dwarf's eyes as Muriel shrinks from them, perceives its meaning even before the dwarf finishes. He triumphantly completes what the dwarf was unable to say.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps the rose also emblemizes for him what he earlier tried to convey to Muriel, that life should be perfect neither in joy nor in pain. The blood-stain renders the rose imperfect. All these associations come together in Dan's mind. Consequently, when he steps down from his seat,

He is as cool as a green stem that has just shed its flower (129). He, too, is imperfect. The loss of his "flower" suggests the passing of his love for Muriel, together with the terrible internal conflicts it generated.

As Dan squeezes past gaping faces, he steps on the man's corns again. The man pushes Dan and angrily rebukes him. But

---

<sup>10</sup>Dan's outburst receives widely varied interpretations: Krasny, p. 73, points out that Dan shouts at the confining building, while Ellison, p. 136, sees it as an expression of horror at Muriel's accepting "the advances of a hideous white man." Ellison does not account for his determination of the dwarf's race, for Toomer does not mention it. Kousaleos, p. 89, does see compassion in Dan's outburst.



Dan turns, and serenely tweaks the fellow's nose. The man jumps up. Dan is jammed against a seat-back. A slight swift anger flicks him. His fist hooks the other's jaw.

"Now you have started something. Aint no man living can hit me and get away with it. Come on on the outside" (129).

Dan's earlier tendency to rant and rave almost without external provocation has been replaced with serenity. But that, too is imperfect, as the "slight swift anger" shows. The bloodthirsty audience follows, expecting to see a spectacle equal to the one on stage. Symbolically, the alley into which the man with corns leads Dan has air

thick and moist with smells of garbage and wet trash. In the morning, singing niggers will drive by and ring their gongs . . . Heavy with the scent of rancid flowers and with the scent of fight (129-130).

These are the unwanted things of human beings. The image coordinates garbage, rancid flowers, and fight. These are, for Dan, no longer wanted. The flowers have been tainted and have lost their freshness. The joy of spring at the story's opening has vanished:

The crowd, pressing forward, is a hollow roar. Eyes of the houses, soft girl-eyes, glow reticently upon the hubbub and blink out. The man stops. Takes off his hat and coat. Dan, having forgotten him, keeps going on (130).

The shy houses beckon to Dan no more.

Perhaps more clearly than any other single narrative, "Box Seat" portrays the two worlds of Cane: the world of dreaming "niggers" and the world of hiving whites. With its enclosures and locks, the world of Mrs. Pribby, of houses and theaters, the world of boxes, shows the hive turned prison. Muriel is its prisoner. Outside this world, Dan wanders, dreaming of a new-world Christ, unsure whether he is the Christ or his prophet. Because he loves Muriel, he risks

imprisonment in the hive in order to set her free. But his uncertainty about his role outside and his impatience to free Muriel make him appear unacceptable to her, though she loves him. Like the prisoner in Plato's cave, Dan cannot make Muriel realize that her comfortable life in the world of boxes is an illusion. In fact, when he finds that he cannot rescue her, he almost accepts imprisonment: she, a prisoner, will be his goddess, his Madonna. But the price of imprisonment requires that Dan accept brutality. When Dan sees that Muriel can accept it, as when she enthusiastically applauds the dwarfs' bloody bout, but not imperfection, as when she expresses revulsion toward the dwarf and the tainted rose, he realizes that he cannot accept the terms of such a prison. Without Muriel, his dream is without purpose, another illusion, and not the higher reality he sought.

In the context of "life," Dan finds frustration and confusion; in the context of "art," he finds clarity and futility. The narrator's dream of a liberating art in "Avey" comes to a bitterly ironic end. The celebration of disillusionment and pain in "Prayer" and "Harvest Song" brings the cycle to an end.

In "Bona and Paul," the narrator addresses himself to the aftermath of the failure. The story serves as a kind of epilogue, but one that brings neither the book nor its world to an end.<sup>11</sup> For though

---

<sup>11</sup>Perhaps the story could also be considered a thematic prologue, for Toomer apparently considered it a kind of "awakening." This point has been much commented on. Dillard, pp. 75-76, was among the first to comment on this aspect of the book, derived from a letter Toomer wrote to Waldo Frank, December 12, 1922. The letter is in the Toomer Collection at Fisk University. The "awakening" has generally been interpreted to mean a return to the South in the character, Kabnis.

the cycle of art ends with disenchantment, alternatives still remain for the Negro "in solution." Shall he cling to his racial identity even as it slips away from him? Such a course can lead to rejection, madness, despair, and even death. Shall he, then, simply deny his heritage and wholly embrace the dominant culture?

The last story in Part II consists of four episodes depicting the budding relationship of the characters in the title: Bona, an aggressive, forward young white woman from the South, and Paul, a dreamy, athletic, intellectual near-white Negro passing for white, both students at the University of Chicago. As in the previous two stories, the narrative point of view most often centers in the male figure, the shared consciousness between narrator and protagonist revealing ties with the thematic motifs of earlier pieces in Cane. The technique continues the expressionistic fusion of traditional narrative, dramatic dialogue, and poetic prose.

Paul is a fusion of the narrator of "Avey," in his curious mixture of athleticism and dreamy intellectualism, of John, in his passivity, and of Dan Moore, in his moodiness. The first episode takes place in a gymnasium during a drill session. Bona feigns illness and sits in a corner watching the exercises. Paul catches her eye:

The dance of his blue-trousered limbs thrills her.

Bona: He is a candle that dances in a grove swung with pale balloons (134).

This image alludes to the festive scenes in Georgia, but the elements are replaced with "civilized" equivalents: for a torch, the candle; for a forest grove, balloons. It also prefigures a more elaborate

analogy in the Crimson Gardens of the final episode. The image lends to Bona's thoughts a lyric quality that contrasts with her more conventional character and sets up her inner conflict:

Bona: He is a harvest moon. He is an autumn leaf. He is a nigger. Bona! But dont all the dorm girls say so? And dont you, when you are sane, say so? Thats why I love-- Oh, nonsense. You have never loved a man who didnt first love you (134-35).

Infatuated with Paul, torn between his physical beauty and her own racial inhibitions, Bona sees an opportunity for closer acquaintance as the boys and girls choose up sides for basketball. Abandoning her pose of indisposition, she intrudes on the girls, whose captain, Helen, is a friend. She demands that she be allowed to play even though it means that someone else will have to drop out (134-35).

Seizing the initiative, Bona grabs the ball and moves into position on the floor. The game under way, she takes every opportunity of throwing herself against Paul, determined to interfere with his play. Paul outplays her, making her face "burn crimson." Their adversary relationship recalls the boxing dwarfs. The game begins amicably enough, but a chance advantage to one spurs the antagonism of the other. In attempting to guard Paul, Bona gets too near, and as he attempts to shoot, his elbow catches her chin sharply, knocking her almost senseless. Paul catches her in his arms, and in the confusion of trying to help her, momentarily feels Bona's passion and his own response. He is bewildered by the swift exchange. Bona breaks free and rushes out, her face flushed "a startling crimson" (136-37). The repeated references to the flush of Bona's face, to burning, and to crimson, characterize her passion and set an important part of the story's color imagery.

The second episode centers in Paul's state of mind, and, later, in that of his roommate, Art. Paul sits in

his room of two windows.

Outside, the South-Side L track cuts them in two.

Bona is one window. One window, Paul.

Hurtling Loop-jammed L trains throw them in swift shadow.

Paul goes to his (137).

Once more the narrator returns to imagery involving glass. The South-Side L, an obvious allusion to the Negro's heritage, visually divides the window in two. The glass acts as medium to see through, as a barrier, and as a surface for reflection. The sense of physical and spiritual fragmentation occurs to Paul in his identifying the parts of the window separately, then moving to his side of the window. From there, he looks out over the

gray slanting roofs of houses . . . tinted lavender in the setting sun. 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 (137-38).

Paul's eye follows, in imagination, a circle that sweeps across the countryside, through the sun, down to the South, and back again to himself. They become a part of him, of his identity. The emphasis on gray and lavender connotes a certain ambiguity in the dusk imagery associated with the first part of Cane. Even in the South, the paler colors persist, in Paul's imagination, giving added weight to the presence of the southern planter who watches the Negress suckle a child:

Paul traces his own development through racial blending. The metonymy of the image, in which the child becomes a song set to wandering among the metaphoric associations of "cane and corn," creates a nostalgic yearning in Paul for his ancestral soil. But when he stands at "Bona's window,"

with his own glow he looks through a dark pane (136).

From his side of the window, Paul sees by the light of the sun. From Bona's side, he sees "with his own glow," but the pane is dark. The implied limitation of vision as he looks through the dark side reveals his doubts about his style of life.

Further reflection by Paul is cut off as his roommate bustles in. Art

is like the electric light which he snaps on (138).

The simile makes an interesting contrast with Bona's image of Paul as a candle. Art is very much a part of industrialized culture: He prods Paul, inwardly disapproving of his roommate's sluggishness:

Art: What in hell's getting into Paul of late, anyway?  
Christ, but he's getting moony. Its his blood. Dark blood:  
moony. Doesnt get anywhere unless you boost it (139).

Art's ironic reference to Paul's "moony" blood alludes to the Negro's moon phase, though he simply means that Paul seems difficult to rouse. He suspects that Paul is a Negro because he has heard the gossip of the girls at the dormitory. And the idea fits his stereotype of "dark blood," i.e., that it is sluggish and needs "boosting." While he has been thinking about Paul, Art has been enthusiastically telling him about a date that he has arranged for that evening. Only after repeated prodding does Paul respond, and the two go out to dinner. There, over

dinner, Art unfolds a double-date with Helen and Bona. He blurts out half-thoughts about the rumors of Paul's race and that his date is indifferent to them. They will all have a party at Crimson Gardens (140).

But as Art prods Paul in an effort to stir some semblance of life into him, the narrator records a very curious thought:

Paul: He's going to Life this time. No doubt of that. Quit your kidding. Some day, dear Art, I'm going to kick the living slats out of you, and you wont know what I've done it for. And your slats will bring forth Life . . beautiful woman. . . (139)

What can this passage mean? Art has just invited Paul to dinner. Art is going to Life? In the context of the narrator's dream in "Avey," that an art will be born that will liberate Negro women--and perhaps all women, regardless of race, who share Avey's condition--does not the passage have an irresistibly suggestive meaning? The narrator clearly puns on the name, Art, for Art is Paul's friend. And Paul is "kidding." Paul will someday "kick the living slats out of [Art] . . . and bring forth Life . . beautiful woman. . ." The entire passage puns on the metaphor of liberating art. It also puns on the Creation, for woman is brought forth out of man. Thus this passage links the artist's function in Cane with the birth, and by extension in the Messiah-Madonna metaphor, the rebirth, of the Negro.

Through the color imagery and the interaction between Paul and the other characters, the third episode traces the effects of blending the black and white worlds. At the same time, it continues the pun on Art as man and personification. The elegantly dressed Art, aglow with good spirits, presents an odd appearance to the narrator, now almost completely submerged in Paul's perceptions:

His face has been massaged, and over a close shave, powdered. It is a healthy pink the blue of evening tints a purple pallor. Art is happy and confident in the good looks that his mirror gave him. Bubbling over with a joy he must spend now if the night is to contain it all. His bubbles, too, are curiously tinted purple as Paul watches them (140-41).

The massaged, close-shaven, powdered face strongly connotes theatrical makeup. The reiteration here of the color pink, previously associated with moments of unreality, ambiguity, particularly in "Theater," represents illusion. As in "Blood-Burning Moon," when Bob Stone's face is suffused with purple (59), the "purple pallor" of Art's face shows the effect of moving from the artificial light to the natural light of dusk. It connotes the black influence on white theater. Art is not aware of this subtle shift in coloration, happy in the illusion provided by his mirror. That is, the theater does not sufficiently recognize the Negro contribution to its happy glow. For the narrator of Cane, and for his surrogate, Paul, this blindness--again glass limits perception--must have negative implications for projecting Negro consciousness. Nevertheless, knowingly or not, the white world continues to absorb the black.

Even Art's joy, bubbling, lends itself to the theater metaphor. Art must "spend" his joy immediately in order to be contained within an evening's performance. Nor does the significance of the bubbles end there. They recall Dan Moore's listening to the rumble which presages the coming of the new-world Christ: the Christ "will need consummate skill to walk upon the waters where huge bubbles burst. . ." (108) That is, the ambiguous mingling of two worlds presents difficulties to a leader who tries to lead the Negro world. The



allegory evokes the motifs of "Seventh Street" and "Rhobert," which begin the second part of Cane, incorporates the Messiah-Madonna motif, and also the theme of emancipation through art: the thrusting "nigger life" working into the white, and the bubble-like helmet sinking the black.

As Paul continues his observation of Art, he becomes conscious of his own state, metaphorically evaluating his own relationship to art:

Paul, contrary to what he had thought he would be like, is cool like the dusk, detached. His dark face is a floating shade in the evening's shadow. He sees Art, curiously. Art is a purple fluid, carbon-charged, that effervesces besides [sic] him. He loves Art. But is it not queer, this pale purple facsimile of a red-blooded Norwegian friend of his? Perhaps for some reason, white skins are not supposed to live at night. Surely, enough nights would transform them fantastically, or kill them. And their red passion? Night paled that too, and made it moony. Moony. That's what Art thought of him (141).

Clearly, Paul's thoughts operate at two levels. His inner explorations show both the human and metaphoric contexts. Paul's detachment grows out of his earlier introspections before the "windows" of his room. It also contrasts with the response of the narrator to dusk in the first part of Cane. The dusk of the North appears cool. Paul's face also appears illusory, as in the dark reflection at Bona's "window." The effervescent purple fluid again evokes the sinking of one world and the rising of the underground world, of the new-world Christ walking on the bubbling waters. That the bubbles are "carbon-charged" suggests the highballs Art orders at the Crimson Gardens. And like highballs that are allowed to stand too long, his effervescence bubbles away and leaves him flat. In the thought that "enough nights would

transform them fantastically, or kill [white skins]," Paul approximates Dan Moore's confrontation with Mrs. Pribby: "Nothing for you to see, old mussel-head. Dare I show you? If I did, delirium would furnish you headlines for a month" (107). Exposure to night is heady stuff, heady enough to transform or destroy. And the passion which Paul imputes to Art, which the narrator hints at in Bona's coloring "crimson," can pale in the night and turn "moony." Both the white and black worlds mingle in the "moon-phase" of racial experience.

Paul also turns his attention to Bona's complexion:

Bona, would she be pale? Impossible. Not that red glow. But the conviction did not set his emotion flowing (141).

Paul seems concerned that his detachment from Art may carry over into his relationship with Bona. The thought foreshadows what happens between them in the second half of the episode. Nor does the ironic reversal of the "Seventh Street" milieu, "Black reddish blood. . . . Who set you flowing?" (71), in "the conviction did not set his emotion flowing," fail to underscore that outcome.

When Paul and Art are admitted by the dormitory's house mother, Art is asked to play the piano while they wait for the girls. He launches into such violent jazz that Paul is moved to speculate that the vehemence conceals an absence of genuine feeling:

Art sat on the piano and simply tore it down. Jazz. The picture of Our Poets hung perilously.

Paul: I've got to get the kid to play that stuff for me in the daytime. Might be different. More himself. More nigger. Different? There is. Curious, though (142).

Paul continues to speculate on the ability of the white man to render black art at night when passion has cooled. The arrival of the girls interrupts Art's playing. The couples pair off. Bona takes Paul's hand:

She squeezes it. Her own emotion supplements the return pressure. And then, for no tangible reason, her spirits drop. Without them, she is nervous, and slightly afraid. She resents this. Paul's eyes are critical. She resents Paul. She flares at him. She flares to poise and security (142).

In Bona's emotions, too, vehemence bolsters flagging passion. Nor does Paul do anything to ease Bona's insecurity.

The walk to Crimson Gardens recapitulates images from earlier stories while adding new permutations:

The Boulevard is sleek in asphalt, and, with arc-lights and limousines, aglow. Dry leaves scamper behind the whirl of cars. The scent of exploded gasoline that mingles with them is faintly sweet. Mellow stone mansions over-shadow clapboard homes which now resemble Negro shanties in some southern alley. Bona and Paul, and Art and Helen, move along an island-like, far-stretching strip of leaf-soft ground. Above them, worlds of shadow-planes and solids, silently moving. As if on one of these, Paul looks down on Bona. No doubt of it: her face is pale. She is talking. Her words have no feel to them. One sees them. They are pink petals that fall upon velvet cloth. Bona is soft, and pale, and beautiful (143).

Washington's "gleaming limbs and asphalt torso of a dreaming nigger" has declined to a prosaic thoroughfare. The mechanical whirl of automobiles stirs dry leaves, dehumanizing the whirl of Karintha's running (2). The odor of gasoline mixed with that of the dry leaves further debases the scent of clover mixed with "a salt tang, a stale drift of sea-week" (81) sensed by the narrator on the top deck of the Jane Mosely: both have a curiously sweet smell. The "island-like" division of the boulevard recalls Becky's alienation. And Paul's feeling

of distance, of looking down on Bona from another plane of existence, intensifies the scene's negation and isolation. Even Bona's gem-like beauty is rendered in the illusory pink, and Paul tells her that she has "the beauty of a gem fathoms under sea" (143). When Bona declares her love for Paul, "the sea casts up its jewel into his hands, and burns them furiously. To tuck her arm under his and hold her hand will ease the burn" (143-44). Paul, who finds Bona pale, nevertheless finds her ardor too intense for his cool state. Like the alienated reaper of "Harvest Song," Paul responds:

Love is a dry grain in my mouth unless it is wet with  
kisses (144).

Bona offers to kiss him, but when she demands that he first declare his love for her, he cannot. Paul, unable to identify unambiguously with his race or with art, finds that he also cannot love. Bona expresses her disgust with him:

"Ach, . . . Youre cold. Cold."  
Bona: Colored; cold. Wrong somewhere.  
She hurries and catches up with Art and Helen (144).

Confused, Bona does not fully comprehend that Paul, who has been critical of her paleness, has himself turned pale and cold, unable to respond. The thought occurs to her that something is wrong with a "colored" man who is cold.

The final episode begins with a shout for the Crimson Gardens, which, as the name suggests, must stimulate the passions:

Crimson Gardens. Hurrah! So one feels. People . . . University of Chicago students, members of the stock exchange, a large Negro in crimson uniform who guards the door . . . had watched them enter. Had leaned towards each other over ash-smeared tablecloths and highballs and whispered: What is he, a Spaniard, an Indian, an Italian, a Mexican, a Hindu, or a Japanese? (144-45)

The excitement, the stimulation of the cosmopolitan atmosphere initially conveyed gives way to a kind of provincial curiosity. The starers annoy Art, who mentally calls them a "godam [sic] pack of owl-eyed hyenas" (145). But

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 green 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 table round him. White lights, or as now, the pink lights of the Crimson Gardens gave a glow and immediacy to white faces. The pleasure of it, equal to that of love or dream, of seeing this (145).

Paul's realization, here, carries him beyond the partial realization he experienced as he looked out his divided window. He clearly senses his isolation, and, because it turns his perception back on himself, he feels the first genuine stirrings of racial identity. But the pink lights which animate the faces of the white people around him suggest that his perception of his own condition is somehow illusory. Nevertheless, the pleasure he obtains from his perceptions is subjectively quite real.

When Paul turns his attention toward his friends, he finds them also

wonderfully flushed and beautiful. Not for himself; because they were. Distantly. Who were they, anyway? God, if he knew them. He'd come in with them. Of that he was sure. Come 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? His sudden starting to rise almost upset the table (145-46).

Though Paul finds the white faces around "flushed and beautiful," he finds them distant, and he is not quite certain they are real. At first thinking that they represent life he would like to join them. But then he realizes that they exist in the Crimson Gardens, which is only a part and not the whole. The idea echoes "Prayer": ". . . I have confused the body with the soul./And the body with its little finger" (131). Having only a moment before convinced himself that these people are beautiful, he wonders if the Crimson Gardens, like a carbon bubble, would turn purple if he looked at it in the night. Paul is so taken up with his fantasy, that he is at the point of acting on it. The accident with the table brings him back to his friends.

Art inwardly is annoyed at Paul's erratic behavior, and suspects that it has something to do with the stares from the people. He is also chagrined that Paul will not confide in him about his race. An argument with Helen distracts him. When the narrator repeats the opening phrases,

Crimson Gardens. Hurrah! So one feels (147).

they have a slightly hollow ring. As the friends warm to each other again over highballs and cigarettes,

A girl dressed like a bare-back rider in flaming pink, makes her way through tables to the dance floor. All lights are dimmed till they seem a lush afterglow of crimson. Spotlights the girl. She sings. "Liza, Little Liza Jane" (147).

The illusory pink associates the night club act with theater, and conveys a sense of "art." Even Paul takes on a rosy glow, in his imagination standing before his window. Once more, "he moves, slightly towards

Bona. With his own glow, he seeks to penetrate a dark pane" (147).

He thinks about the South again, but in a new context:

Paul: From the South. What does that mean, precisely, except that you'll love or hate a nigger? Thats a lot. What does it mean except that in Chicago you'll have the courage to neither love nor hate (148).

These words are addressed, mentally, to Bona. They reveal that Paul has begun to see the South as essentially different from the North in that genuine passion is possible there. Paul continues to address Bona mentally, thinking that he would rather know than love her not because there is greater pleasure in thinking, but because he has just discovered the joy in it. Bona has come along too late, because even as recently as that afternoon Paul dreamed. Now he has awakened to the spell of his ancestral home:

A Negress chants a lullaby beneath the mate-eyes of a southern planter. O song! (148)

Paul's imagination superimposes the Negress' lullaby on the song of the "bare-back rider" as he thinks again that his eyes are awake. Then he speaks to Bona and says that she will know something of him before the evening is over (148-49).

With the third repetition of the opening phrases, the story moves to its climax. After "the bare-backed rider" has finished her song, the narrator describes the orchestra warming up for jazz. The song about "Little Liza Jane" seems to linger in the atmosphere, and between snatches of the words that interweave with Helen's thoughts about Paul, it characterizes her duplicity:

Helen . . . O Eliza . . . rabbit-eyes sparkling, plays up to, and tries to placate what she considers to be Paul's contempt. She always does that . . . Little Liza Jane. . . Once home, she burns with the thought of what she's done. She says all manner of snidy things about, and swears that she'll never go out again when he is along. She tries to get Art to break with him, saying, that if Paul, whom the whole dormitory calls a nigger, is more to him than she is, well, she's through (149).

But she does not break with Art, and justifies her going out with him when Paul is along as a kind of fatal fascination. She antagonizes Bona, but the orchestra begins to play before the antagonism can be resolved.

In an image reminiscent of "Seventh Street," the narrator contrasts the two worlds:

Crimson Gardens is a body whose blood flows to a clot upon the dance floor. Art and Helen clot. Soon, Bona and Paul. Paul finds her a little stiff, and his mind, wandering to Helen . . . . supple, perfect little dancer, wishes for the next dance when he and Art will exchange (150).

Unlike the raw, elemental flow of the blood of "nigger life," this blood lacks freedom and energy. Paul senses the clotting in Bona and hopes to escape. But Bona realizes that she is losing Paul and tries to engage him in conversation. As in the other stories, women are simply no match for men in conversation. The talk leads to a battle of wits, and Bona, defeated, tries to pull away from Paul. The struggle that follows, as Paul constrains Bona to dance with him, arouses them sexually. Instinctively, they move away from the dance floor and go out together.

Their agitation, as they pass the black doorman, earns them a knowing look:



Too many couples have passed out, flushed and fidgety, for him not to know. The chill air is a shock to Paul. 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 leers. It smiles sweetly like a child's. Paul leaves Bona and darts back so quickly that he doesn't give the door-man a chance to open. He swings in. Stops. Before the huge bulk of the Negro.

"You're wrong."

"Yassur."

"Brother, you're wrong" (152).

The chill of the night air shocks Paul back to a state resembling his earlier detachment. But now he sees the Gardens in purple, the color associated with southern black experience. The face that leers out of that purple echoes King Barlo's when Esther offered herself to him, and the sweet child-like smile evokes Esther's dream of the miraculous, sweet-mouthed baby. But even more strongly, Paul's justification to the doorman recalls the narrator's statement to the policeman in "Avey":

I tell him I come there to find the truth that people bury in their hearts. I tell him that I do not come there with a girl to do the thing he's paid to watch out for. I look deep in his eyes when I say these things, and he believes me (85-86).

Paul's statement to the doorman has striking correspondences:

"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, 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" (152-53).

Though this passage is more fully developed, the general attitude expressed is similar. In each case, the character assures an authority figure that he is more interested in truth than in sex. In "Avey," the narrator then went on to explain to Avey his dream of a liberating art. In Paul's case, the protagonist explains his vision to the doorman. The vision, itself, is an affirmation of racial heritage in metaphoric terms. But it is more, for Paul unites images of the two worlds in a single metaphor: The Gardens are like a bed of roses turned purple at dusk. In stating that whites are rose petals and darks are dusk petals, Paul implies that the differences between them are superficial. In stating that he will go out and gather to himself petals both rose and dusk, he affirms his kinship with both white and black worlds. But in pausing to explain his truth to the doorman, Paul loses his chance to share it with Bona.<sup>12</sup> By the time he returns to the place where he left her, she has gone.

Paul's relationship with Bona recapitulates the major motifs of the second part of Cane. Without exception, the women, whether indirectly, as in "Avey," or directly as in "Theater," "Box Seat," and "Bona and Paul," find their men fainthearted. Yet in both Dan Moore

---

<sup>12</sup>Most of the critics recognize the failure implied in Paul's "awakening." Bona was to be the immediate object of the revelation, and probably, the most capable of understanding it. But Dillard, p. 77, Ellison, p. 137, Krasny, pp. 76-77, Kousaleos, p. 95, and George C. Matthews, "Toomer's Cane: The Artist and His World," CLA Journal, 17 (June 1974) 555, manage to find a positive element in that awakening. They share the idea, generally, that Paul's surrogate, Kabnis, must plunge into the depths in order to recognize what it means to be a Negro. Only then can he fully "awaken."

and Paul, this evaluation is shortsighted. These men become so forceful that the women become frightened or badly upset. The narrator in "Avey" shows occasional moments of cruelty, but he does restrain himself. And John, though he does show aggressive elements in his fantasies, is so withdrawn that he never communicates directly with Dorris. None of the men consummates his relationship with a woman. The adoration of the mysterious woman persists in the North.

But these women also show a progressively increasing "hive" mentality. Avey, actually, is an exception, since she stands outside middle-class morality as a prostitute. Even so, her laziness and indifference make her seem far more alienated from the southern Negro woman than her sensuality might otherwise suggest. Dorris dances with primitive abandon, but yearns for a family and a home. Muriel is a school teacher, and thoroughly middle class in her attitudes, though she responds strongly, inwardly, to Dan's "animalism." And finally, Bona is actually a southern white woman who seems to be attracted to Paul because he is exotic. The pattern indicates a gradual absorption of the Negro, in color and in culture, by the white. This pattern is also carried metaphorically by the imagery confusing day and night, and by that connoting ambiguity and illusion.

With the absorption of the Negro through the Madonna-figures, the narrator introduces the liberating forces: the Messiah-figures and art. Both forces fail in their functions, because of weaknesses in the men or the women, until, in "Bona and Paul," Messiah and art are reduced to conundrums. That Paul does manage to unite the divided

worlds which troubled the other protagonists comes at the cost of his racial identity.<sup>13</sup> The image of this union uses the dusky purple of black experience to modify the symbols of both white and black, connoting a racial fusion in which both races are ultimately blended into one. The suffusion of purple suggests a renewed interest, on the part of the narrator, in the southern black experience. And, indeed, Paul feels that his metaphor is an "awakening"<sup>14</sup> to a new level of experience, one which, if "Prayer" is an indication, transcends the limitations of race. Does "Kabnis," the third part of Cane, develop this transcendent "awakening" in a southern setting?

---

<sup>13</sup>Only Innes, 315-16, seems to see an element of fusion, a possible loss of identity as a "black" man, in the conclusion of the story.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid. Most commentators feel that Paul immerses himself in his racial past.

## CHAPTER V

### "KABNIS"

Unlike the first two parts of Cane, the third part, "Kabnis," focuses on the central character of the title. Toomer's experimental technique of fusing narrative, poetry, and drama reaches its fullest development here, a development that complements and intensifies the cultural and racial "dilution" of Kabnis.<sup>1</sup> This development is the culmination of the narrator's theme of symbolic prodigal son returning to celebrate and affirm his mythic origins. In the first part, the narrator concentrates on southern women as symbolic mothers of the declining black race and as potential Madonnas who might bear Messiahs to rejuvenate it. In the second part, he shifts his attention to the potential Messiahs, strongly identifying himself with them through the continuity of technique, imagery, and theme in their consciousness, but these messianic figures squander their potential through the failure of their dreams. The narrator's hope in "Avey" for a liberating art

---

<sup>1</sup>Mabel M. Dillard, "Jean Toomer: Herald of the Negro Renaissance" (Ohio University, 1967), unpubl. diss., p. 78, following the lead of Toomer's correspondence with Waldo Frank, says that the "structural, esthetic, and thematic circle . . . is completed by a return to the South," and Michael Jay Krasny, "Jean Toomer and the Quest for Consciousness" (University of Wisconsin, 1972), unpubl. diss., p. 50, points out that Cane organically fuses poetry, prose, and drama as an "artifice of vision" which would give "artistic permanence" to the fading Negro folk-spirit.

declines to dream, to illusion, and to lack of communication. Thus, the symbolic sons, isolated and alienated from their mythic origins, are absorbed into the white cultural "hive." Only Paul Johnson shares the narrator's "awakening"<sup>2</sup> to the reality of a new racial order.

But Ralph Kabnis is not Paul. The six episodes or scenes that make up the third part of Cane trace the attempts of a northern, "diluted" intellectual to affirm his racial heritage. He shares much in common with Paul and the other men of the second part, as well as with the narrator. But the shared consciousness does not develop the opening lid of the soul's "flesh-eye" to reveal the new racial order. Rather, it develops the rudimentary consciousness of the narrator as poet and son of the South.<sup>3</sup> More than any of the other pieces, "Kabnis" reveals an alter ego of the narrator, but one who remains in the South rather than returns North. In trying to affirm his mythic past, Kabnis manages to confirm his alienation from it. Uncertain of the vestiges of the black ethos, by turns terrified by racial tensions and overwhelmed by the beauty of the countryside, Kabnis experiences the identity crisis he shares with his paling counterparts in the second part

---

<sup>2</sup>Patricia Chase, "The Women in Cane," CLA Journal, 14 (March 1971) 273, sees Carrie, rather than Kabnis, as an extension of Paul's "awakening." But William C. Fischer, "The Aggregate Man in Jean Toomer's Cane," Studies in the Novel, 3 (Summer 1971) 207, takes the position that most of the commentators agree on, that Kabnis is the logical extension of Paul. The degree of reconciliation of Kabnis with the question of race, however, is widely varied in the critical interpretations.

<sup>3</sup>This position approximates those adopted by Fischer, Peter G. Kousaleos, "A Study of the Language, Structure, and Symbolism in Jean Toomer's Cane and N. Scott Momaday's House Made of Dawn" (Ohio University, 1973), unpubl. diss., and Roberta Riley, "Search for Identity and Artistry," CLA Journal, 17 (June 1974).

of Cane. In this uneasy frame of mind, Kabnis falls under the influence of Fred Halsey, a wheelwright and exponent of the dignity of manual labor. During a visit to Halsey's home, Kabnis panics when a rock with a message telling the "northern nigger . . . t leave" is thrown through the window. Believing that the message is meant for him, Kabnis flees Halsey's house. His flight, his symbolic sinking into the red Georgia mud, and his acquaintance with Lewis, at whom the warning is really directed, are followed by a clumsy, halfhearted effort to restore pride in himself through manual labor. As Halsey's employee, Kabnis finds his most meaningful experience in "escaping" to "The Hole," a cellar under Halsey's shop where a mysterious old Negro, Father John, lives in isolated immobility, tended by Carrie Kate, Halsey's young sister. Here, during a party, Kabnis reveals his agony of doubt whether in Father John there persists some viable remnant of the black ethos. In the final scene, Kabnis confronts the old man for some token of hope. But the old man's message is not equal to Kabnis' hope. Thus, Kabnis epitomizes the alienated figures of the earlier parts of Cane, moving from shadowy characters through progressively revealed characters to emerge at last, a tortured man struggling to identify himself with a dying ethos for which his nature makes him hopelessly unfit.

The first scene discovers Kabnis lying restlessly awake late at night in a shack in rural Georgia. The haunted, dream-like description of the shabby room creates a sense of his isolation, both ethnic and human, and as in "Theater," where a single shaft of light serves to focus on the protagonist's inner conflict, " . . . the cabin room

is spaced fantastically" around the oil lamp by which Kabnis tries to read. And as in so much of Cane, the environment is alive with imaginary presences:

Whitewashed hearth and chimney, black with sooty saw-teeth.  
Ceiling, patterned by the fringed globe of the lamp. The  
walls, unpainted, are seasoned a rosin yellow. And cracks  
between the boards are black. These cracks are the lips the  
night winds use for whispering. Night winds in Georgia are  
vagrant poets, whispering. Kabnis, against his will, lets  
his book slip down, and listens to them (157).

Kabnis' uneasiness is hinted at in the whitewashed hearth and chimney, reminiscent of the "white and whitewashed wood of Washington" fragmented by the "nigger life" of Seventh Street. The image creates a surrealistic projection of Kabnis' consciousness and shows a deformed reflection of the exuberant "nigger life": the thrusting, splitting force has degenerated to black gnawmarks. The personification of the night winds as vagabond, whispering poets nicely suggests Kabnis' own rootlessness combined with the insidious, sibilant presence. The unpainted walls have taken on a resiny hue suggestive of racial dilution, while the cracks piercing the boards metaphorically set them to "whispering" about their mythic origins.

The night presence is formless and requires a sympathetic shape to make it palpable. For Kabnis, the "warm whiteness of his bed, the lamp-light" form a refuge which makes the night seem more menacing. Because it connotes the false security of white culture, the bed and the light "do not protect him from the weird chill" of the night winds' song:

White-man's land.  
Niggers, sing.  
Burn, bear black children  
Till poor rivers bring



Rest, and sweet glory  
In Camp Ground (157).

Kabnis, lying in his "white" bed realizes that the reality of his "blackness" compels him to choose between two worlds. But in a white man's land, "niggers" sing and burn and bear black children for whom there is no rest until they reach the "promised land." The choice is a painful one. The white world offers alienation, loss of identity, and the haunting claims of the black ethos. The black world, beautiful as it is, offers oppression.

Kabnis, himself, physically lacks the robustness of the southern black man. His

thin hair is streaked on the pillow. His hand strokes the slim silk of his moustache. His thumb, pressed under his chin, seems to be trying to give squareness and projection to it. Brown eyes stare from a lemon face. Moisture gathers beneath his arm-pits. He slides down beneath the cover, seeking release (158).

This description echoes that of Esther, with its pale, withered, lifeless connotations (43). The negative connotations of the "lemon" complexion contrasts with the "mangrove-gloomed, yellow flower face" (16) of Carma. And Kabnis is the only man in Cane who perspires, a most realistic symptom of his fear.

Kabnis' preoccupation with appearance as a manifestation of inner conflict continues in his apostrophe to the idealized metaphor of the South:

Kabnis: Near me. Now. Whoever you are, my warm glowing sweetheart, do not think that the face that rests beside you is the real Kabnis. Ralph Kabnis is a dream. And dreams are faces with large eyes and weak chins and broad brows that get smashed by the fists of square faces. The body of the world is bullnecked. A dream is a soft face that fits uncertainly upon it . . . . God, if I could develop that in words.

Give what I know a bullneck and a heaving body, all would go well with me, wouldn't it, sweetheart? If I could feel that I came to the South to face it. If I, the dream (not what is weak and afraid in me) could become the face of the South. How my lips would sing for it, my songs being the lips of its soul. Soul. Soul hell. There aint not such thing (158).

The reality of Kabnis' perceptions consists of the violence projected in the lullaby of the night winds' song: the reality of the white man's world smashes the dream of the black. If the sensitive, beautiful world of the black could be protected by a figure of strength and aggressiveness, then it could be protected. The "real Kabnis" is this dream. But the shell in which this dream lives is weak and afraid, a projection of what is weak and afraid within him. Thus, Kabnis yearns for the image of a virile black man such as Barlo in which to house the soul of the South.

But no sooner has this thought occurred to him than he angrily spurns it. At that moment, a rat runs "across the thin boards of the ceiling" sending "a powdery faded red dust . . . Dust of slave-fields, dried, scattered" spraying down on his head as he thrusts it from under the covers to investigate the sound (159). Kabnis' denial of soul is greeted with this reminder of the field rat in "Reapers," left bleeding and dying as the horse-driven mower moves inexorably over it. As if to suggest faded, diluted blood, the "powdery faded red dust" symbolically anoints Kabnis' head. Kabnis cannot so easily escape the "dust of slave-fields," however scattered, as by a simple denial of soul. This restless soul haunts him.

Unable to sleep because of the oppressive night, unable to distract himself with reading, Kabnis feels that "something sure as

fate" will happen. The suggestion of fatefulness and the incident of the hen which follows, recalls the "false dawn" of "Blood-Burning Moon":

A hen, perched on a shelf in the adjoining room begins to tread. Her nails scrape the soft wood. Her feathers ruffle (159).

Shouting at the hen and hurling his slipper at the wall, Kabnis startles it and rouses others in the chicken yard outside. He seems to blame the hen for his own discomfiture:

"Why in Christ's hell cant 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 dont. Hell of a mess I've got in: even the poultry is hostile. Go way. Go way. By God, I'll . . ." (159).

Kabnis goads himself to fury. Leaping from his bed, wild-eyed, he bursts into the adjoining room, causing the hen to fly madly about in fright with Kabnis in pursuit. Seizing her by the neck, he

steps out into the serene loveliness of Georgian autumn moonlight. Some distance off, down in the valley, a band of pinesmoke, silvered gauze, drifts steadily (160).

The scene evokes a whole series of associations with earlier passages of Cane: the intrusion of the hen into Kabnis' anxieties recalls Mrs. Pribby's aimless prattle and Dan Moore's threat to kill her if she said some nasty thing; the sudden cackling of the poultry in the chicken yard recalls the false dawn of "Blood-Burning Moon"; and the drifting pine-smoke, silvered in the moonlight, recalls Karintha, her dead child, and the wraith-like smoke that hangs in the air after she buries it in the sawdust pile.

These associations are intensified by the narrative consciousness merging with Kabnis' thoughts, and by the lullaby accompanying the scene:

The half-moon is a white child that sleeps upon the tree-tops  
of the forest. White winds croon its sleep-song:

rock a-by baby . . .  
Black mother sways, holding a white child on her bosom.  
when the bough bends . . .  
Her breath hums through pine-cones.  
cradle will fall . . .  
Teat moon-children at your breasts,  
down will come baby . . .  
Black mother (160).

The motifs of the black race absorbed by the white appear here in full force. The full moon of omens and of the "false dawn" and "dreaming nigger" is reduced by half. The "silvered gauze" becomes metaphorically the swaddling for the half-white child asleep in the treetops. The "white winds" replace the "vagabond poets." This white force sets the treetops to swaying, metaphorically, the "black mother sways, holding a white child on her bosom." Her white child will fall, her "moon-child," her diluted offspring. The whole ambiance surrounding the death of Karintha's baby and its disposal in the pine sawdust, its wraith haunting the treetops in the pine-smoke, somehow is communicated to Kabnis. He "whirls the chicken by its neck, and throws the head away. Picks up the hopping body, warm, sticky, and hides it in a clump of bushes. He wipes blood from his hands onto the coarse scant grass" (160-61). Symbolically, Kabnis re-enacts the burial of Karintha's baby, and grotesquely carries out his own wish to give his weak face "a bull-neck and a heaving body."

His pagan ritual performed, Kabnis wants to curse God:

Earth's child. The earth my mother. God is a profligate  
red-nosed man about town. Bastardy; me. A bastard son has  
got a right to curse his maker. God . . . (161).

Kabnis figuratively becomes that child fallen to earth from the treetops. He bitterly reduces God to the level of a profligate, less even than the Red Cross man who waited for Rhobert with a respirator. The passage evokes numerous references to God debased: Becky's "blue-sheen God with listless eyes," the vortex of emptiness in Fern's eyes, the "white-faced sardonic god" of "Conversion," and the "Nigger God" of "Seventh Street," ashamed of his own creation. But as Kabnis is about to shake his fists at heaven,

he looks up, and the night's beauty strikes him dumb. He falls to his knees. Sharp stones cut through his thin pajamas. The shock sends a shiver over him. He quivers. Tears mist his eyes. He writhes.

"God Almighty, dear God, dear Jesus, 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-songs, so close to me that I cannot reach them. There is a radiant beauty in the night that touches and . . . tortures me" (161-62).

Struggling to reject his racial past, Kabnis can only affirm it in the presence of the beauty of the night. In sinking to his knees, his actions recall Dan Moore's desire for Muriel: he, too, worshipped beauty and struggled with inconsistencies in it. Pleading for an ugly world, one that he can despise and reject, Kabnis momentarily finds beauty, but his affirmation lacks the joyous discovery of the speaker in "Song of the Son."

In the next instance, Kabnis recoils from his behavior:

"Ugh. Hell. Get up, you damn fool. Look around. Whats beautiful there? Hog pens and chicken yards. Dirty red mud. Stinking outhouse. Whats beauty anyway but ugliness if it hurts you? God, he doesnt exist, but nevertheless He is ugly. Hence, what comes from Him is ugly" (162).

Here, Kabnis defines beauty and ugliness in terms of their effect on him.<sup>4</sup> Denying the reality of God, Kabnis nevertheless equates ugliness with him, because he must accept the reality of pain. And since he defines pain as ugliness, and ascribes it to God, he confirms God negatively. Actually, what this passage shows is Kabnis' twisted, hurt nature, his terrible inner struggle to affirm and deny it.

Distraught over imaginary terrors and the futility of an existence dominated not only by squalor but by "lynchers and business men" (162), Kabnis deplores the injustice which permits some men to victimize others, and unworthy men to rise to importance:

"... that cockroach Hanby, especially. How come that he gets to be principal of a school? Of the school I'm driven to teach in? God's handiwork, doubtless. God and Hanby, they belong together. Two godam moral-spouters" (162).

Then, as suddenly as his hatred for his employer overwhelmed him, the spell of beauty and his urge to worship it overcomes him:

"Oh, no, I wont let that emotion come up in me. Stay down. Stay down, I tell you. O Jesus, Thou are beautiful . . ." (162).

---

<sup>4</sup>Donald G. Ackley, "Theme and Vision in Jean Toomer's Cane," Studies in Black Literature, 1 (Winter 1970) 59, finds this struggle "skepticism," in that Kabnis dreams of being white, a nightmare because it can never be. John M. Reilly, "The Search for Black Redemption: Jean Toomer's Cane," Studies in the Novel, 2 (Fall 1970) 321, sees it merely as twisted logic. Fischer, 208-09, sees it in terms of Kabnis' racial identity, and Rafael A. Cancel, "Male and Female Interrelationships in Toomer's Cane," Negro American Literature Forum, 5 (Spring 1971) 30, concurs. Mark Irving Helbling, "Primitivism and the Harlem Renaissance" (University of Minnesota, 1972) 224, argues that "Toomer was not making a simple dichotomy between a primitive world of elemental harmony and a civilized world of social fracture," and he hints that in Kabnis there is "ultimate completeness." But Helbling does not fully carry out this thought.

Unlike the men in the first part of Cane, Kabnis does not adore a woman. The mystery of a world full of contradictions obsesses him, as his own contradictory nature torments him:

"Come, Ralph, pull yourself together. Curses and adoration don't come from what is sane. Miles from nowhere. A speck on a Georgia hillside. Jesus, can you imagine it--an atom of dust in agony on a hillside? That's a spectacle for you. Come, Ralph, old man, pull yourself together" (162).

In trying to deny God, whom he senses in the beauty of the landscape, Kabnis perceives his own absurdity. That a thing as tiny as he should rant against the cosmos strikes him as irrational. Kabnis resolves to dispel the phantoms of imagination and to restore his sense of proportion.

Grown more rational once again, Kabnis becomes aware of his stiffness and the chill of the night wind:

He rises. He totters as a man would who for the first time uses artificial limbs. As a completely artificial man would. The large frame house, squatting on brick pillars, where the principal of the school, his wife, and the boarding girls sleep, seems a curious shadow of his mind. He tries, but cannot convince himself of its reality. His gaze drifts down into the vale, across the swamp, up over the solid dusk bank of pines, and rests, bewildered-like, on the court-house tower. It is dull silver in the moonlight. White child that sleeps upon the top of pines. Kabnis' mind clears. He sees himself yanked beneath that tower. He sees white minds, with indolent assumption, juggle justice and a nigger . . . (163).

The denial of any reality higher than his own seems to have left Kabnis without resistance to the physical reality of the night or the power to move easily. Kabnis seems to have become an artificial man, a construct of his own mind and one that must discover anew the art of movement and perception. In this frame of mind, familiar aspects of the scene around him become unreal. The spell of the South constantly pulls at his

existential being, his determination to be what he wills, so that as his gaze turns to the distant trees and beyond, an unwilled spectacle unfolds in his mind. The courthouse tower, symbol of justice, becomes the scene of his own lynching. Underlying his attempts to be what he wills persists that fear.

As he contemplates the images of his malaise, Kabnis thinks how remote he is from the populated centers of the North and how preferable they would be to his present location. An intolerable yearning overcomes him, and to combat this new assault on his emotions,

he forces himself to narrow to a cabin silhouetted on a knoll about a mile away. Peace. Negroes within it are content. They farm. They sing. They love. They sleep. Kabnis wonders if perhaps he gives them bad dreams. Things are so immediate in Georgia (163-64).

Since the landscape and the people associated with it give him such bad dreams, Kabnis logically wonders whether the southern milieu communicates his own condition to others. And with these thoughts he begins to think that he has dispelled the vapors of his imagination. But on returning to his cabin, he finds that he still cannot sleep, nor can he soothe himself with drinking or smoking, for these activities are frowned on by Handy. Kabnis is struck by the irony that, in a place where men are burned and hanged, smoking is considered immoral. Once more Kabnis wonders how he ever came to such a hole, and the emphasis given to the place as a hole, a grave, foreshadows what is to come at the end of his story (164).

More immediately, Kabnis' contemplation of the "hole" as grave leads him to the thought that people make noise because they fear



silence. And in the silence around him, Kabnis almost can feel the presence of dead things reaching out to touch him:

I swear I feel their fingers . . . . Come, Ralph, pull yourself together. . . What in hell was that? Only the rustle of leaves, I guess. You know, Ralph, old man, it wouldn't surprise me at all to see a ghost. People don't think there are such things. They rationalize their fear, and call their cowardice science. . . Fine bunch, they are. Damit [sic], that was a noise. And not the wind either. A chicken maybe. Hell, chickens don't wander around this time of night. What in hell is it? (165)

However hard he tries to repress the impact that the Georgian atmosphere has on him, Kabnis' willingness to believe in the supernatural predominates over his rationalizations. His attempts to rationalize his entire existence, to abjure God and the beauty and mystery of the South, fail, and now he half-believes in ghosts. The mysterious noise frightens him so badly that he puts out the light and seizes a poker to defend himself. His behavior, if motivated by a fear of ghosts, is completely irrational. . . Being of the dead, and creatures of the night, ghosts can hardly find darkness an impediment, nor a poker a physical threat. Yet Kabnis prepares to do battle with his incorporeal enemies. No doubt Kabnis really feels, at some level, that the sound must have some corporeal basis, and no matter how unrealistic, his abject fear of lynching probably energizes his present behavior.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup>All of the commentaries agree that the fear of lynching is paramount in Kabnis' mind. Ackley, 62, says that Kabnis' dream of being white requires a "spiritual lynching," an interesting and valid idea that clarifies the final scene. Kousaleos, p. 106, sees Kabnis' vision of being lynched, *Cane* (163), as phallic, a curious interpretation, at first. But if we extend the idea to Kabnis' spiritual emasculation, perhaps Kousaleos' idea becomes more apposite.

On opening the door, Kabnis discovers that the sound was caused by a calf dragging a yoke of wood:

"Well, I'm damned. This godam place is sure getting the best of me. Come, Ralph, old man, pull yourself together. Nights cant last forever. Thank God for that. Its Sunday already. First time in my life I've ever wanted Sunday to come. Hell of a day. And down here there's no such thing as ducking church. Well, I'll see Halsey and Layman, and get a good square meal. Thats something. And Halsey's a damn good feller. Cant talk to him, though. Who in Christ's world can I talk to? A hen. God. Myself . . . . I'm going bats, no doubt of that. Come now, Ralph, go in and make yourself go to sleep. Come now . . . in the door . . . thats right. Put the poker down. There. All right. Slip under the sheets. Close your eyes. Think nothing . . . a long time . . . nothing, nothing. Dont even think nothing. Blank. Not even blank (166).

Repeatedly, Kabnis calls on himself to gather his scattered feelings, to pull himself together, and it is plain that his imagination seizes on every sight and sound to pull him apart. Here, finally, Kabnis sees the ludicrousness of the workings of his mind. He looks forward to the new day, even though his obligations include activities that he finds uncongenial. Above all, he feels that he is isolated in not having someone he can talk to. He resolves his problems temporarily by talking to himself, by telling himself to go to sleep. Just as he had to learn to walk again, figuratively, when he willed himself to be a completely rational being, he once more instructs himself on how to go to sleep. Without consciously denying God, the spell of the South, or any other spiritual elements, Kabnis empties himself. As he sleeps at last, the winds once more take up their song:

White-man's land.  
Niggers, sing.  
Burn, bear black children  
Till poor rivers bring  
Rest, and sweet glory  
In Camp Ground (167).

The second scene is set almost entirely in Fred Halsey's parlor on Sunday. The dialogue among Halsey, Layman, and Kabnis shows that Kabnis cannot find comfort among his friends. The opening description reads like stage directions. A fire burns cheerfully in the fireplace, contrasting with the cold autumn weather. The seediness of the parlor is partly redeemed by its venerable service to generations of Halsey's middle-class forebears, whose portraits dominate the room. The description of these shows that Halsey's ancestry is of mixed racial strains (167-68). . . . A window overlooks

a forlorn, box-like, whitewashed frame church . . . . Above its squat tower, a great spiral of buzzards reaches far into the heavens. An ironic comment upon the path that leads into the Christian land . . . (169).

This description significantly recalls the box-motif from the second part of Cane, adding another dimension to the imprisoning boxes that stunt the black psyche.<sup>6</sup> The passage also evokes the buzzard-image of "Seventh Street," where the blood of "niggers" went "swirling like a blood-red smoke up where the buzzards fly in heaven" (72). Even the whitewashed exterior of the church ironically alludes to the vigorous "nigger life" in Washington. Also visible are Negroes "gathering, on

---

<sup>6</sup>Somehow, the critics who see Kabnis as ultimately reconciled with his racial identity overlook the implications of this image. Reilly, Chase, Cancel, Sister Mary Kathryn Grant, "Images of Celebration in Cane," Negro American Literature Forum, 5 (Spring 1971) 32-34, Charles W. Scruggs, "The Mark of Cain and the Redemption of Art: A Study in Theme and Structure of Jean Toomer's Cane," American Literature, 44 (May 1972) 276-91, and Kousaleos--who sounds inconclusive--see the end of the story as essentially positive. Yet the confining box-image is represented by the church and culminates in the prison-like "Hole" in which the final two scenes are set.

foot, driving questionable gray and brown mules, . . . for afternoon service" (169). The whole atmosphere suggests a dumb submission to the influence of the constricting church, an allusion to the charlatanism of preachers introduced in "Esther" and "Conversion."

Into this literal and figurative scene come Halsey, "a well-built, stocky fellow, hair cropped close . . .," smelling of wood and glue, "for it is his habit to potter around his wagon-shop even on the Lord's day"; Professor Layman, "tall, heavy, loose-jointed Georgia Negro, by turns teacher and preacher, who has traveled in almost every nook and corner of the state and hence knows more than would be good for anyone other than a silent man"; and Kabnis, "trying to force through a gathering heaviness," trailing in after them (169-70). The conversation casually turns to Kabnis' seeming reclusiveness. Layman suggests that perhaps Kabnis does not like southern blacks. But Halsey defends him, mock-seriously, and with considerable unconscious irony:

Halsey: Aint that, Layman. He aint like most northern niggers that way. Aint a thing stuck up about him. He likes us, you an me, maybe all--its that red mud over yonder--gets stuck in it and cant get out. (Laughs.) An then he loves th fire so, warm as its been. Coldest Yankee I've ever seen. But I'm goin t get him out now in a jiffy, eh, Kabnis? (170).

Halsey means to joke about Kabnis' seeming stuck up and getting stuck in the mud, but Kabnis has already shown in the first scene that there is truth in what Halsey says. Kabnis cannot wholly accept the southern blacks, and metaphorically, gets stuck in the southern milieu. Halsey's comment also foreshadows scene three. The underlying implications about involvement put Kabnis on the defensive.

Kabnis tries to respond perfunctorily, but almost slips:

Kabnis: Sure, I should say so, sure. Dont think its because I dont like folks down this way. Just the opposite, in fact. Theres more hospitality and everything. Its diff-- that is, theres lots of northern exaggerations about the South. Its not half the terror they picture it. Things are not half bad, as one could easily figure out for himself without ever crossing the Mason and Dixon lines: all these people wouldnt stay down here, especially the rich, the ones that could easily leave, if conditions were so mighty bad. And then too, sometime back, my family were southerners y'know. From Georgia, in fact-- (170-71).

In referring to the way northerners feel about the South, Kabnis almost reveals how he really feels. Indeed, he actually does reveal it in the act of denial. The terror which is not half as bad as northerners picture it is precisely what he experienced the previous night. In trying to strike just the right note between what he wishes to conceal and what he thinks his acquaintances want to hear, Kabnis misgauges the effect of mentioning his family:

Layman: Nothin t feel proud about, Professor. Neither your folks nor mine.

Halsey (in a mock religious tone): Amen t that, brother Layman. Amen (turning to Kabnis, half playful, yet somehow dead in earnest). An Mr. Kabnis, kindly remember youre in th land of cotton--hell of a land. Th white folks get th boll; th niggers get th stalk. An dont you dare touch th boll, or even look at it. They'll swing y sho. (Laughs.)

Kabnis had sought to strengthen his ties with the South, but both Layman and Halsey find a suggestion that Kabnis thinks that he is somehow better than other Negroes and hasten to warn him. Halsey turns to satire, but as the scene continues, he shows an increasing inability to see the effect his well-meaning satire produces in Kabnis.

Kabnis expresses alarm:

Kabnis: But they wouldnt touch a gentleman--fellows, men like us three here--

Layman: Nigger's a nigger down this away, Professor. An only two dividins: good an bad. An even they aint

permanent categories. They sometimes mixes um up when it comes t lynchin. I've seen um do it (171-72).

Nor is his alarm eased by Layman's earnest admonitions. Halsey jokingly points out that he cannot remember a lynching, but Layman presses his point about taking nothing for granted. Kabnis grows quite desperate and asks whether things have not considerably improved. Layman then compares the behavior of white people to hornets when a brick is thrown into their nest. Their present equanimity must not be taken as permanent. Once again, the narrative consciousness draws together the hiving instinct of whites: the ant image of "Blood-Burning Moon," the bees of the second part of Cane.

As the three men develop the hornet image, Kabnis shows increasing agitation. Layman reveals that he comes from where the hornets are "always swarming," that he has seen them so incensed as to hack dead bodies to pieces. Kabnis demands to know what Layman does or says on such occasions, but the responses dismay him:

Layman: Them's th things you neither does a thing or talks about if y want t stay around this away, Professor.

Halsey: Listen t what he's tellin y, Kabnis. May come in handy some day.

Kabnis: Cant something be done? But of course not. This preacher-ridden race. Pray and shout. They're in the preacher's hands. That's what it is. And the preacher's hands are in the white man's pockets (173-74).

Indignant, forgetting that Layman is a preacher, Kabnis vents his true feelings. His words echo the narrator's satires on King Barlo and the "African Guardian of Souls." To Kabnis' repeated entreaty whether something cannot be done, Layman responds with an anecdote in which a black man, seeing two companions killed with an ax, asks his white

captors whether he may die in his own way. Receiving permission, the man drowns himself. The terrible finality of Layman's alternative is underscored by audible singing from the church and by a woman's voice, "rising and falling in a plaintive moan" until it "swells to shouting" (175).

Kabnis responds to the woman's shouting<sup>7</sup> with mixed feelings that get at the root of his problems with identity:

His face gives way to an expression of mingled fear, contempt, and pity (175).

His reaction resembles his response to the southern landscape in the first scene, lacking only the adoration of beauty. For the landscape represents his visual, emotional, and intellectual perceptions. Visually, the landscape overwhelms his senses. At the same time, this visual awe rouses deep, confused emotions. While they stir in him a desire to celebrate and affirm, they also awaken uncertainty about his racial identity, and fear. Kabnis is a "diluted" Negro, like Paul, and acculturated to the northern white "hive." His intellectual perceptions include a freedom from the terror he associates with the southern Negro. In fact, the hint of intellectual and social superiority which he let out in his conversation with Layman and Halsey suggests an unconscious desire to escape the potential consequences of his racial identity. Layman's assertion that, light or dark, all are "niggers" in the eyes of the whites and subject to the same violence

---

<sup>7</sup>Fischer, 207, says that Kabnis' reaction "betrays the extent of his own urban deracination."

visibly shakes Kabnis. The woman's shouting, then, represents that part of black identity toward which he tries to feel superior, and which he tries to purge from his own identity through intellect, but which is entrenched within him through Layman's insights. The woman's ecstasy, whether of joy or agony, touches a part of him that he intellectually denies.<sup>8</sup>

Halsey observes Kabnis' reaction and teases him by suggesting that they go to church. Kabnis is so distracted that he almost agrees before he realizes what Halsey says. The conversation that follows serves as a device for introducing an important minor character in whom important revelations will later center. Layman, significantly, has taken no notice of the woman's shouting: as with the atrocities committed by whites on blacks, he cultivates a kind of stoic reserve. But when Kabnis seriously expresses his wish that "shouting" should be stopped when it threatens to interfere with a sermon, Layman once again takes him up. He points out that the same men and women who seem unable to control themselves in the community outside of church seem to be the same ones who cannot control themselves inside. Halsey joins in this sentiment, citing the comment of Lewis that "a stream what's dammed has got t cut loose somewheres" (175-77). The significance of this statement for Kabnis, with his terrible inner struggle, is momentarily diverted into a discussion about Lewis.

Lewis appears to be enigmatic to Layman and Halsey. Their description of the man's behavior shows him to be inquisitive and

---

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 209. Fischer assumes that the "shouting" expresses anguish.



potentially troublesome. Lewis, apparently, inquires into the affairs of blacks and takes notes on local incidents. One note, particularly, disturbs Layman, for it concerns a horrible lynching that he feels would be better left unrecorded. When Halsey guesses at the incident, Layman supplies the correct name: Mame Lamkins. The men pause as the shouting from the church intensifies, " . . . almost perfectly attuned to the nervous key of Kabnis" (178). Kabnis is torn between wanting to hear the story of Mame Lamkins and his terror of it. The shouting woman subsides as the congregation sings an old spiritual, and "her heavy breathing has the sound of evening winds that blow through pinecones" (178). Throughout the remainder of the scene, clearly building now to its climax, the story of Mame Lamkins mingles with Kabnis' fear and the shouting woman's outbursts.

Layman tells his grisly story with a detachment that fits his earlier statements. . . His

voice is uniformly low and soothing. A canebrake, murmuring the tale to its neighbor-road would be more passionate (178).

The narrator recalls the epigraph of "Carma," with its hoarse chorus of talk. And Layman's voice seems to become imbued with the crooning spiritual from the church, the elemental rustling of the cane, and the winds in the pines which earlier suggested to Kabnis an ironic lullaby for "diluted" Negro babies.

Layman: White folks know that niggers talk, an they dont mind jes so long as nothing comes of it, so here goes. She was in th family-way, Mame Lamkins was. They killed her in th street, an some white man seein th risin in her stomach as she lay there soppy in her blood like any cow, took an ripped her belly open, an th kid fell out. It was living; but a nigger baby aint supposed t live. So he jabbed his knife in it an stuck it t a tree. An then they all went away (178-79).

The story echoes, with savage irony, the dead and psychically maimed children and women of the first part of Cane, and the abortive dreams of a Messiah in the second. The infant ripped from the dead woman's abdomen and impaled to a tree carries through to its inevitable conclusion the allegorical implications of the "dreaming nigger." The allusion to the crucifixion of the black Messiah, even when a child, combines with the jealousy of Herod in an ultimate negation of black regeneration. The crushing impact of the story is ironically heightened by the shouting woman who, a moment later, cries frantically:

"Jesus, Jesus, I've found Jesus. O Lord, glory t God, one mo sinner is acomin home" (179).

At the height of this outburst, a paper-wrapped stone crashes through the window.

The paper contains a message, and its effect on Kabnis, as Halsey reads it, is electric:

"You northern nigger, its time for y t leave. Git along now" (179).

Kabnis is convinced it is meant for him. Coming after his torment in the first scene, Halsey's good-natured but not always understood gibes, and Layman's well-meant deflation of Kabnis' inner defenses, coming especially after the terrible stories punctuated by the shouting woman's ecstatic cries, Kabnis collapses emotionally. In a description reminiscent of Rhobert sinking in the mud under the weight of his helmet-house,

Kabnis knows that the command is meant for him. Fear squeezes him. Caves him in. As a violent external pressure would. Fear flows inside him. It fills him up. He bloats. He saves himself from bursting by dashing wildly from the room (179).

Metaphorically redeveloping Rhobert's middle-class aspirations, the narrator shows that Kabnis wears his own house of preconceptions on his head, and as this collapse admits the water, fear, he begins to drown. Curiously, as he fills with the fear, the external pressure becomes internal, causing him to bloat and nearly to explode. Unlike Rhobert who merely sinks in his own demoralization, Kabnis is able to act. He converts his psychic energy into physical, and bolts from the house. Unlike the shouting woman, he cannot release so much so easily. His pressures finally burst the dam of Lewis' metaphor.

For a moment, neither Halsey nor Layman comprehend what has happened to Kabnis. The crumpled paper and the stone assume massive proportions in their imaginations, as if weighting them to the spot (179-80). Finally, the sense of the words in the context of that room comes through to them and they run after Kabnis. The landscape now undergoes a change as scene and as metaphor:

A false dusk has come early. The countryside is ashen,  
chill. Cabins and roads and canebrakes whisper. The church  
choir, dipping into a long silence, sings:

My Lord, what a mourning,  
My Lord, what a mourning,  
My Lord, what a mourning,  
When the stars begin to fall.

Softly luminous over the hills and valleys, the faint  
spray of a scattered star . . . (180).

The portents and signs which, beginning with King Barlo and culminating with Louisa, presaged a new dawn, and then, a false dawn, have declined to a false dusk. The glorious dusk of the first part of Cane has declined to falsity. With Kabnis, the dusk becomes illusion. Even the choir's song hints at this declension. In the version appearing in the

text, the last word of the first three lines is "mourning," and the word is most appropriate in the context. But this spiritual also uses the word, "morning," alternately.<sup>9</sup> In either case, the play on the word, with its associations with the false dawn of the earlier parts of Cane, intensifies the image which closes the second scene of "Kabnis." The last line of the spiritual is echoed by "the faint spray of a scattered star," a clear personification of Kabnis' dilution and panic.

The narrator's consciousness, often obscured by that of the protagonists, emerges again in the third scene:

A splotchy figure drives forward along the cane- and corn-stalk hemmed-in road. A scarecrow replica of Kabnis, awkwardly animate. Fantastically plastered with red Georgia mud. It skirts the big house whose windows shine like mellow lanterns in the dusk (180-81).

As if to mock Kabnis because he tries to reject his racial identity and mocks God, the narrator caricatures him as a scarecrow, recalling the image of Kabnis as an automaton. Here, too, Kabnis has been immersed in the soil of Georgia, metaphorically the soul of black people, the blood of the rat, the dust of which marked him in the first scene. His ironic apostasy is suggested further by the scene's Halloween-like atmosphere. The fantastic scarecrow, the stalks of cane and corn connoting the harvest festival, and the jack-o-lantern house combine into an image of Walpurgisnacht.

The character of witches' Sabbath continues in the supernatural dread expressed by Kabnis as he reaches his cabin:

---

<sup>9</sup>See John Lovell, Jr., Black Song: The Forge and the Flame (New York: Macmillan, 1972), p. 368. Whether the word is "mourning" or "morning," the song plainly reflects the cataclysmic effects of Judgment Day.

The figure caroms off against the cabin door, and lunges in. It slams the door as if to prevent some one entering after it.

"God Almighty, theyre here. After me. On me. All along the road I saw their eyes flaring from the cane. Hounds. Shouts. What in God's name did I run here for? A mud-hole trap. I stumbled on a rope. O God, a rope. Their clammy hands were like the love of death playing up and down my spine. Trying to trip my legs (181).

Kabnis, of course, fears a lynch mob. But his fantastic appearance and the diabolical elements in his dread place the imagined mob in league with demons and goblins. The scene becomes a satirical inversion of the "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" (22) which raised the narrator's affirmations to their highest pitch. The "genius of the South" has become a scarecrow, hounded into a "mud-hole trap," and embraced by death. Kabnis' absurdity is intensified in the references to "mud-hole": in the first scene, Kabnis calls the locale a hole, saying that he might as well be in his grave (164); in the second scene, Halsey makes sport of his seeming stand-offishness by saying that he gets stuck in the mud (170). Finally, Kabnis associates the red Georgia mud with southern Negroes (161-62) and then with "the many dead things moving in silence" (164-65) whose fingers he is convinced he can feel touching him. The images form an important motif in his association of the supernatural dread and the fear of lynching that haunt him.

The absurd and exaggerated fear approaches its climax as Kabnis seizes a broom and begins probing the dark areas of the room with it. The irony of using a broom in the context of the Halloween atmosphere approaches the comic. When he probes under the bed for his

invisible enemies and strikes a tin washtub (181-82), the hollow sound it produces momentarily bewilders him, then seems to return some semblance of rationality to him. Abandoning his broom, Kabnis once more seizes a poker, replacing his supernatural weapon with something more suited to physical encounter, and continues his search for lynchers. The sounds of hounds and yelling in the distance reach him, and send him into a new paroxysm of fear and absurdity:

"O God, theyre after me. Holy Father, Mother of Christ--hell, this aint no time for prayer--" (182).

Invoking the names of the deities whom he really cannot accept, Kabnis becomes doubly absurd as he realizes how ridiculous the invocation sounds. The added dramatic irony of the sudden reversal in his words, the inexplicable shift from supernatural appeal to common sense, is reserved for the reader.<sup>10</sup>

When the voices outside the door announce the arrival of Layman and Halsey, Kabnis is still sufficiently distraught to threaten them with the poker, but his friends disarm and try to calm him (182). Still hysterical, Kabnis orders his friends away from the door and forbids them to light the lamp. Halsey tells Kabnis that no one is

---

<sup>10</sup>Innes, 321, mentions the "Walpurgis [sic] like caperings of Kabnis." No doubt the witches' Sabbath, associated with St. Walpurgis whose feast day is April 30, has become confused with Halloween. But the former is properly associated with the eve of May day, hence spring, whereas the images in "Kabnis" plainly have the autumnal character of All Saints' Eve. Perhaps witches' Sabbath has a more sinister ring than Halloween because the latter has taken on pejorative associations.

after him, but Kabnis is convinced, citing the hounds mentioned earlier. Halsey responds:

These aint th days of hounds an Uncle Tom's cabin, feller.  
 White folks aint in fer all them theatrics these days.  
 Theys more direct than that. If what they wanted was t  
 get y, theyd have just marched right in an took y where y  
 sat. Somebodys down by the branch chasin rabbits an treein  
 possums (183).

The irony of Halsey's remark about Uncle Tom's Cabin and theatrics is compounded when a shot is heard and Halsey announces that the hunter's name is "Tom." As the friends begin to take effect on Kabnis' mind, Halsey lighting the lamp, once more casting the circular fringe patterning on the ceiling, the shadows of the moving men "huge against the bare wall boards," the terrors become less immediate (183). It is as if the light and friendship reduce the very real trauma of Kabnis to mere shadows, frightening in themselves only in isolation. Halsey takes charge of the reclamation, ordering Layman to start a fire in the hearth, offering Kabnis a drink to restore his spirits. Then Halsey begins the philosophical conversion by commenting on the liquor they share:

Th boys what made this stuff--are y listenin t me, Kabnis?  
 th boys what made this stuff have got th art down like I  
 heard you say youd like t be with words (184).

Halsey thus suggests that Kabnis' inability to function as a poet has something to do with his unrealistic preoccupations: the men who produce the moonshine they drink are artists, and, presumably, men who work with their hands.

Halsey then presses the liquor on Layman, who at first declines, but Halsey insists in words that make the drink a local

ritual. After Layman accepts, Halsey offers the liquor to Kabnis. Kabnis no sooner begins to drink than Hanby, the school principal,<sup>11</sup> enters unannounced:

He is 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. Or, when he is up North, he lets it be known that his ideas are those of the best New England tradition. (185).

Finding the men drinking, and having long disapproved of Kabnis' personal habits, Hanby uses the incident as an excuse to fire Kabnis. Hanby humiliates Kabnis, and Kabnis, partly because of the liquor, and partly because he is demoralized, cannot effectively defend himself (186-87). Halsey, who has begun to dominate the scene, becomes indignant with Hanby. He threatens Hanby with violence, and, when he has cowed him, declares that he will take Kabnis home to his shop: "Shapin shafts and buildin wagons'll make a man of him what nobody, y get me? What nobody can take advantage of" (188).

Halsey's outburst wanders off into incoherence and reduces the group to a disagreeable silence. In some vague corner of his mind, Kabnis recognizes that he has come to an important turning point, that he must now intervene between Hanby and Halsey on his own behalf and set them both straight. He realizes that failure to act now would be to lose all power to direct his own future from within himself, and that this failure would reduce him to the level of complete impotence.

---

<sup>11</sup>Innes, 317, says that Hanby is a prototype of the "college principal" in Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man.



But Kabnis has been victimized by an irreversible crush of circumstances. Like Rhobert, he is shredded and weighed down by his own spiritual bankruptcy, by the ministrations of well-meaning friends, and by the contempt of a martinet. He sinks into the Georgia mud, however unwillingly, because he has chosen the dream rather than the reality, and the dream has made him vulnerable to fears for which he is unprepared: his discomfiture now is expressed in impotent gestures;<sup>12</sup> his conviction that he must speak decisively now....

is just strong enough to torture him. To bring a feverish, quick-passing flare into his eyes. To mutter words soggy in hot saliva. To jerk his arms upward in futile protest. Halsey, noticing his gestures, thinks it is water that he desires. He brings a glass to him. Kabnis slings it to the floor. Heat of conviction dies. His arms crumple. His upper lip, his mustache, quiver (189).

The Kabnis who dreamed of finding words for his vision of the South, who railed at the contradiction between beauty and ugliness, who believed that "dreams are faces with large eyes and weak chins and broad brows that get smashed by the fists of square faces" (158) is speechless. His gestures echo his automaton-like gestures in the first scene and his scarecrow-like movements earlier in the third.

The pattern of his relationship with Halsey grows clearer: Halsey has, all along, shown amusement toward Kabnis' intellectual pretensions, but he has been completely blind to the depth of Kabnis' inner conflict. Unwittingly, Halsey helped goad Kabnis to a crisis,

---

<sup>12</sup>Benjamin F. McKeever, "Cane as Blues," Negro American Literature Forum, 4 (Winter 1970) 62, and Kousaleos, 111, see Kabnis' immobilization as a kind of "Hamletesque stasis." Both characters tend to rationalize idealistically instead of acting decisively, in the view of McKeever and Kousaleos.

and in offering him a glass of water at the one moment when Kabnis needed to speak unhindered, Halsey reveals how badly he misreads his friend. Kabnis can only lash out at the glass in helpless rage. His frustration recalls the dilemma of the reaper of "Harvest Song," who thirsts and hungers but can neither drink nor eat nor communicate to others his inner condition.

Kabnis crumples, but his final surrender is yet to come: Halsey's continued domination of Kabnis is forestalled by the timely arrival of Lewis:

Rap! rap, on the door. The sounds slap Kabnis. They bring a hectic color to his cheeks. Like huge cold finger tips they touch his skin and goose-flesh it. Hanby strikes a commanding pose. He moves toward Layman. Layman's face is innocently immobile (189).

The reactions of the characters are a study: they adopt various poses in keeping with their natures. Hanby assumes dignity; Layman seems prepared to endure whatever comes, stoically; Kabnis colors in fear; and Halsey, still assuming control, calls out for identification.

Lewis is a revelation:

He is the queer fellow who has been referred to. A tall wiry copper-colored man, thirty perhaps. His mouth and eyes suggest purpose guided by an adequate intelligence. He is what a stronger Kabnis might have been, and in an odd faint way resembles him. As he steps towards the others, he seems to be issuing sharply from a vivid dream. Lewis shakes hands with Halsey. Nods perfunctorily to Hanby, who has stiffened to meet him. Smiles rapidly at Layman, and settles with real interest on Kabnis (189-90).

The resemblance between Kabnis and Lewis is striking; and the suggestion that "he is what a stronger Kabnis might have been" clearly indicates a complement requiring further development in the story. From the description, he appears to be darker than Kabnis, hence not as

"diluted."<sup>13</sup> The aura of dream surrounding him also suggests that he is a link with the messianic figures of the earlier stories. Thus he draws together the relationship between the "diluted" Negroes and the "dreaming niggers." Interestingly, dark-skinned Negroes in Cane either betray their race outright, as Barlo and Hanby do in quite different ways, or they die, as Tom Burwell does. The light-skinned Negroes try to regenerate the race, to return to the dignity and beauty of the race before it was diluted. The irony is curious.

Lewis' interest in Kabnis is immediate and deep. Having passed Kabnis on the road when he was in distress, Lewis has come to offer assistance. Halsey, completely in charge, comments that "a good bath's bout all he needs . . . an somethin t put his mind t rest" (190). Lewis then explains that the note hurled through the window was meant for himself, and that it had not been the work of a lynch mob but of Negroes who had grown uncomfortable at Lewis' presence. Kabnis is incredulous and wants to know more. But Lewis puts him off, suggesting that Hanby might somehow be involved, and offering to tell Kabnis more

---

<sup>13</sup>In a much-quoted letter from Toomer to Waldo Frank, Toomer says that "the negro of the folk-song has all but passed away: the negro of the emotional church is fading. A hundred years from now these negroes, if they exist at all, will live in art. And I believe that a vague sense of this fact is the driving force behind the art movements directed towards him today." And earlier in the same letter, he says: "There is one thing about the negro in America which most thoughtful persons seem to ignore: the negro is in solution, in the process of solution. As an entity the race is losing its body, and its soul is approaching a common soul." Toomer Collection, Fisk University, Box 3, File 7, item #829 (?), n.d. This idea runs through Cane. Lewis is shown less advanced along the line Kabnis is on.

later on. Thus he indicates that he is not to be frightened off by such tactics. He says that he is on a sort of contract with himself (191). He has come South for one month and will not leave until that month is up. Lewis' purpose in coming South is clearer in his own mind than Kabnis', but remains something of a mystery.

Halsey seems to use Lewis' interest in Kabnis as a means of strengthening his connection with Lewis:

Halsey: Come round t th shop sometime why dont y Lewis? I've asked y enough. I'd like t have a talk with y. I aint as dumb as I look. Kabnis and me'll be in most any time. Not much work these days. Wish t hell there was. . . . (In answer to Lewis' question.) He's goin t work with me. Ya. Night air this side th branch aint good fer him. (Looks at Hanby. Laughs.)

Lewis: I see . . . . (191).

Halsey has earlier introduced the idea of taking Kabnis to work with him in his shop. But at the time, he was casting about to help Kabnis, as he was under fire from Hanby. Since Kabnis did not resist then, apparently it became a settled thing in Halsey's mind. But Halsey's mention of it now, especially after referring to his repeated invitations to Lewis, hints at his capitalizing on the idea.

Lewis' phrase, "I see . . . , " is more than the usual cliché, for it literally and metaphorically turns the narrator's attention to Kabnis' innermost being as Lewis and the narrator share it:

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. Arm's length removed from him whose will to help . . . There is a swift intuitive interchange of consciousness. Kabnis has a sudden need to rush into the arms of this man. His eyes call, "Brother." And then a savage, cynical twist-about within him mocks his impulse and strengthens him to repulse Lewis. His lips curl cruelly. His

eyes laugh. They are glittering needles, stitching. With a throbbing ache they draw Lewis to (191-92).

The narrator's consciousness appears in this passage as it evokes the root imagery first introduced in the epigraph on the title-page, then developed in "Avey," and culminated in "Box Seat." Lewis reacts toward Kabnis in a way reminiscent of Dan Moore toward the portly Negress, and Kabnis' reaction to Lewis shows an analogous hostility. Ironically, Lewis sees Kabnis out of contact with the soil at the moment when Kabnis is covered with mud and trapped in a "hole." But Lewis sees "a vision of the life they are to meet"; i.e., he does not see Kabnis literally. And the "intuitive interchange" between the two men leads to a perverse reaction in Kabnis that echoes his response to the landscape in the first scene: again his terrible inner struggle turns him away from what would be most meaningful to him.

Lewis cannot endure the callous rejection and "brusquely wheels on Hanby," demanding to speak to him in private (192). Hanby's acquiescence suggests that the matter has to do with the message thrown through Halsey's window. As he and Hanby leave through the door,

a woman, miles down the valley, begins to sing. Her song is a spark that travels swiftly to the near-by cabins. Like purple tallow flames, songs jet up. They spread a ruddy haze over the heavens. The haze swings low. Now the whole countryside is a soft chorus. Lord. O Lord . . . Lewis closes the door behind him. A flame jets out . . . (192).

The lyricism of the image,<sup>14</sup> its incorporation of the color purple, associated with affirmations of the narrator in the first part of Cane,

---

<sup>14</sup>Grant, 33, draws a striking contrast between this scene and the opening of "Theater."

gives a halo of sound to Lewis as he leaves. Immediately after, Halsey notices that the kettle is boiling and he prepares to bathe Kabnis: the hint of baptism is unmistakable. And the baptism is to take place in the tub under Kabnis' bed, the very tub which Kabnis prodded with his broom earlier in the scene. While Halsey expatiates on the manliness of Lewis, Kabnis exclaims in awe over the beauty of the song flowing up the valley. Only when Halsey mentions that Lewis is in real danger does Kabnis focus on what he is saying. His old fear of lynching returns. But Halsey sets aside the possibility of lynching and "bustles and fusses about Kabnis as if he were a child. Kabnis submits, wearily. He has no will to resist him" (193-94).

Halsey's domination of Kabnis is complete. Like an experienced man with an innocent child, Halsey initiates Kabnis into the mysteries of being a "man" of action and conviction. Layman, too, assisting at this investiture, offers an uncharacteristic opinion without being asked:

Layman (his voice is like a deep hollow echo): Thats right. Thats true, sho. Everybody's been expectin that th bust up was comin. Surprised um all y held on as long as y did. Teachin in th South aint th thing fer y. Nassur. You ought t be way back up North where sometimes I wish I was. But I've hung on down this away so long--

Halsey: An there'll never be no leavin time fer y (194).

The preacher who previously accepted everything fatalistically, expresses a wish that he had gone to the North and escaped. His statement now indicates that it is too late for him to escape and the interruption by Halsey suggests that it is too late for Kabnis, too.

At some deeper level of his being, Kabnis welcomes Halsey's domination. He has regressed to a kind of infantilism akin to the

failures and withdrawals of the characters in the second part of Cane. The three remaining scenes of "Kabnis" show the effects of this outer-directed development: . . . trapped, spellbound by the Georgia landscape and the rude siren's song of the Negroes, bowed as fatalistically as any victim of a crushing environment, Kabnis has become a counterpart of Rhobert.

After a month of his new occupation as Halsey's apprentice, Kabnis' inaptitude for manual labor is painfully revealed. Just as his snobbery has alienated him from his ethnic identity, so it has ill-fitted him for working with his hands. The fourth scene develops the inherent limitations of Halsey's occupation, but especially Kabnis' clumsiness, and his vague dissatisfaction with his new position as hinted at in his curious relationship with a mysterious figure who lives in Halsey's cellar.

The introductory passages of the scene are prosaic stage directions describing the run-down appearance of Halsey's premises. The shop is in considerable disrepair, with crumbled cement walls, plaster fallen away from laths, a loft used as a secondary barrier to the elements because the roof leaks, abundant clutter of Halsey's trade--old wheels, broken shafts, tools, piles of junk--a commentary on the price Halsey pays for his "independence." The disarray also offers a gloomy prognosis for Kabnis' ability to achieve "wholeness" in such an environment. A comfortable hearth with a blazing fire and well-worn chairs around it, however, show that Halsey is popular and that his shop serves as a gathering place for Sempter's men. A group of large wooden blocks used for wagon work stands idle in the middle

of the floor, showing that business is slow, a fact that presently will be seen to trouble Halsey greatly. To the right of a centrally located door, stairs lead down to the cellar, called, with significant irony, "The Hole." Halsey uses this "Hole" to house the mysterious old man and also for entertainments "when he spices up the life of a small town" (194-95).

The drabness of the scene, especially the background suggestiveness of "The Hole," shows that this place hardly improves Kabnis' circumstances and plays on his earlier feelings that he has been buried in a grave. The stage directions conclude with a vignette of Halsey,

wonderfully himself in his work overalls, [standing] in the doorway and [gazing] up the street, expectantly. Then his eyes grow listless. He slouches against the smooth-rubbed frame. He lights a cigarette. Shifts his position. Braces an arm against the door (196).

The eager anticipation with which he awaits something worthwhile to do shows that, though he is not cowed by men such as Hanby, he still depends on the work that they bring him, and that without it his life is almost meaningless.<sup>15</sup> Kabnis, coming into this scene, appears to be the child he has become in spirit: when he comes to the door from outside, Halsey does not move, and he must stoop to get under the older man's arm. He also appears

awkward and ludicrous, like a schoolboy in his big brother's new overalls (196).

---

<sup>15</sup>Dillard, pp. 81-82, says that Halsey, in his exaltation of manual labor, is an exponent of Booker T. Washington. On p. 80, she also points out the indignities he endures.



Having nothing better to do, the two discuss desultory topics: lunch, an imminent visit from Lewis, a party for that same night. They are ill at ease and eager for distraction; Halsey, for the work that gives his life meaning, and Kabnis, for the meaning that will answer his restless soul.

The entrance of several other characters, Layman, unidentified "town fellows," the blacksmith, and Lewis, provides the diversion Halsey and Kabnis seek. The townsmen, discomfited by Lewis, and the blacksmith having other business, leave almost at once (197). Only Layman and Lewis remain with Halsey and Kabnis, and Layman turns at once to Lewis' preparations to return North. The men express regret at his departure, and Lewis himself expresses another regret, not that of a fondness for the town or its people, but that his mysterious business has not been finished to his satisfaction. Though Halsey pries into that business, Lewis will only hint that it is something that Hanby will not like and quite different from what representative elements in the town want:

Lewis: . . . We had a talk. But what he found queer, I think, was not my opinions, but my lack of them. In half an hour he had settled everything: boll weevils, God, the World War. Weevils and wars are the pests that God sends against the sinful. People are too weak to correct themselves: the Redeemer is coming back. Get ready, ye sinners, for the advent of Our Lord. Interesting, eh, Kabnis? but not exactly what we want (199).

This parody of Hanby's attitudes combines the Messiah motif of a black renaissance with the smug complacency of Rhobert. It suggests that Lewis has approached Hanby on behalf of the town's Negroes in an effort to improve their condition, but that Hanby responded with pious clichés.

Halsey, observing that Lewis seems to direct his remarks to Kabnis for understanding, petulantly hints that Lewis might have shared his ideas with him. He points out again how often he has invited Lewis to do so (199).

In recounting to the men why he has not approached them more directly, Lewis acts as spokesman for the narrator in summing up their characters: Layman's incentive for silence outweighs anything Lewis could offer him to break that silence; Kabnis already knows more than he can assimilate; and Halsey is an artist in his own way (200). As if to demonstrate that Halsey is satisfied with his manual skills in a way that Kabnis can never be, a white man comes into the shop with "a broken hatchet-handle and the severed head" (201). The required repair is a simple matter, but the suggestiveness of the broken handle with "the severed head" ironically underscores Kabnis' condition and recalls the incident with the chicken in the first scene. Halsey turns the hatchet over to Kabnis for practice. As Kabnis begins to bungle the job, the white man makes pleasantries about Halsey's breaking in a new man. But

Kabnis burns red. The back of his neck stings him beneath his collar. He feels stifled. Through 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 if his own life was staked upon the perfect shaving of it (201-02).

The strain of forcing himself to do something for which he is unsuited makes Kabnis seem to be another Rhobert: he, too, has taken on himself the crushing weight of responsibilities in order to satisfy an alien

standard.<sup>16</sup> Halsey further discomfits Kabnis by taking the handle from him and, with a few deft strokes, repairing it.

As if to complete Kabnis' humiliation, Hanby arrives and gives Kabnis orders about an axle to be shaped into a crowbar. Halsey has rescued Kabnis from Hanby's contumely only to force him to endure it on his behalf: Halsey's earlier statement, that working in his shop "shapin shafts and buildin wagons'll make a man of [Kabnis] what nobody, y get me? what nobody can take advantage of" (188) becomes scathing irony. Layman, who endures all unpleasantness with a detachment that is strange in a teacher and preacher, merely finishes his lunch during Kabnis' debasement and prepares to leave. This, his final appearance in the story, is marked by the same commitment to convention that he has displayed in all his appearances. He observes the amenities by bidding Lewis a flattering farewell, waves to the others, and leaves (203-04).

Shortly after Layman's departure, Halsey's sister Carrie K. arrives with lunch. The narrator's description of the adolescent girl lacks the sensuality associated with the other women in Cane, but she has a wistful charm. Kabnis' response to her apology for being late with the lunch shows that Kabnis has warm feelings for her. As Halsey

---

<sup>16</sup>Dillard, p. 81, says that Halsey is a "stabilizing influence in [Kabnis'] deep downward slope." Her position does not account for Kabnis' increasing hysteria under that influence. Todd Lieber, "Design and Movement in Cane," CLA Journal, 13 (September 1969) 47, points out that "both Halsey . . . and Hanby . . . have forsaken their sense of race and have been absorbed into the conception of reality put forth by the southern whites." This idea accords with Booker T. Washington's doctrine of accomodation.

and Kabnis begin their lunch and Carrie turns to take lunch down to the old man in "The Hole," Lewis rises and draws her attention:

Their meeting is a swift sun-burst. Lewis impulsively moves towards her. His mind flashes images of her life in the southern town. He sees the nascent woman, her flesh already stiffening to cartilage, drying to bone. Her spirit-bloom, even now touched sullen, bitter. Her rich beauty fading . . . He wants to-- He stretches forth his hands to hers. He takes them. They feel like warm cheeks against his palms. The sun-burst from her eyes floods up and haloes him. Christ-eyes, his eyes look to her. Fearlessly she loves into them. And then something happens. Her face blanches. Awkwardly she draws away. The sin bogies of respectable southern colored folks clamor at her: "Look out! Be a good girl. A good girl. Look out!" (205).

This intuitive meeting between the girl and Lewis parallels that between him and Kabnis: in his eyes, both Carrie and Kabnis seem to be withering, fading flowers; and just as he seemed to be offering a means of regenerating, reviving Kabnis, so he seems to be offering the same to Carrie. But Kabnis turned away from Lewis, and for quite different reasons, Carrie also turns away. In her case, the intuitive interchange carries the messianic implications of their meeting further than with Kabnis. Clearly, with his "Christ-eyes," Lewis is a Messiah-figure of the type projected for the renaissance of the black race throughout Cane. And most significantly, the image which Carrie confers on him is the sun, not the moon or the ambiguous lights which play about the other men. Thus Lewis emerges as the clearest Messiah-figure in Cane, with all the connotations of hope and renewal inherent in sun imagery.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup>All of the contemporary critics have followed the lead of Robert A. Bone, The Negro Novel in America, rev. ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), p. 87, in emphasizing this "Christ figure." Lieber, 48, puts it most forcefully: "Only Lewis has retained the

But like the "November Cotton Flower, Carrie's meeting with Lewis is unseasonal, doomed by conventional morality. The "brown eyes that loved without a trace of fear" (7) are clouded. She draws away:

She gropes for her basket that has fallen to the floor. Finds it, and marches with a rigid gravity to her task of feeding the old man. Like the glowing white ash of burned paper, Lewis' eyelids, wavering, settle down. He stirs in the direction of the rear window. From the back yard, mules tethered to odd trees and posts blink dumbly at him. They too seem burdened with an impotent pain (205).

In the brief moment of their meeting, the whole metaphoric progress of Cane appears: the sunset mood of the first part ending the "false dawn," the moon phase of the second part, and now a "sun-burst" that declines almost at once to glowing embers reminiscent of "Portrait in Georgia": "Eyes-fagots,/ . . . . her slim body, white as the ash of black flesh after flame" (50). The fearless brown eyes of radiant sunset and dusk yield to malevolent after-glowing. Coming after these metaphoric and symbolic associations, the mules in the back yard suggest the confined, constricted condition of the Negro, the trees and posts, suggesting the uprooted, stunted, or dying trees to which the impotent charismatic figures of Cane are compared, unable to set them free. The dumbness of the mules, too, suggests the mute isolation of Lewis and the submerged teacher and poet in Kabnis. Moreover, the

---

pride and dignity of his manhood. . . . Only Lewis' attitude can bring true resurrection to the spirit of the black man." The other critics vary this statement, adding links with earlier "Christ figures" such as Dan Moore (Innes, 317). Ackley, 60, dissents by saying that Lewis is an alter ego of Kabnis rather than a black Christ. But then Ackley misses some of the messianic implications in Kabnis, himself. Lewis is, indeed, an alter ego of Kabnis. Somehow, if the two could be joined, a black Christ might emerge.

sterile mules connote the stagnant condition of the protagonists. And in the oddity of the trees and posts to which they are tethered there is an echo of the mule-and-horse-gnawed hitching posts in the midnight scene when Esther goes to the brothel to offer herself to King Barlo (46). The reduction of messianic figures to the level of mules gnawing in frustration at their symbols of confinement, wonderfully evokes the boys chipping at the boxes in "Avey." The image sums up the narrative thrust of Cane and provides a symbolic climax balancing that in "Georgia Dusk."

Lewis eventually turns back to Halsey and Kabnis, who, pre-occupied with their lunch, have not noticed the interchange between Lewis and Carrie. When Lewis asks questions about Carrie, he learns of the old man living in "The Hole" and his interest quickens. Halsey invites him to meet the old man at the party to be held in the cellar that night. Lewis agrees to come, but wonders what the old man does down there. Halsey refers the question to Kabnis who "blows off t him every chance he gets" (207). But Kabnis only "gives a grunting laugh. His mouth twists" (207). And when Carrie appears immediately after, expressing concern because the old man has not eaten in nearly two weeks, the suggestion that Kabnis is in some way responsible begins to grow. Carrie forestalls further discussion about the old man's condition when she remembers that a lumber wagon has broken down and she was supposed to ask Halsey to fix it. At the prospect of a major piece of work, Halsey throws the remains of his lunch into the fire, arranges his blocks, and waits anxiously at the door (207). Kabnis withdraws into an after-lunch cigarette, and Lewis, alone with his thoughts again,

wonders what will become of Carrie. Like the narrator in "Fern," he thinks of taking her North with him, then wonders what for. In another allusion to Kabnis' child-like condition, Lewis concludes that Carrie could mother Kabnis (207-08). Sensing that he has been excluded by Kabnis and Halsey, Lewis leaves, bringing the scene to an end.

A significant feature of the fifth scene is its imagery echoing the sensuousness of "Georgia Dusk" and its preparation of a celebration:

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, saw-mills, 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 their song (209).

The image returns the rural atmosphere associated with a simpler, happier way of life.<sup>18</sup> As in "Georgia Dusk," it includes reminders of the urban civilization that encroaches on the landscape. But the spell of night imbues everything in the scene with sensuous overtones. The scene is also reminiscent of the "dreaming nigger" image of "Box Seat," except that here the southern landscape functions as the male image, while the night is cast as female. The pregnant Negress evokes, once

---

<sup>18</sup>Grant, 34, correctly sees that this image is a celebration echoing earlier images, esp. "Georgia Dusk," and contains an affirmation of life. But the abortive elements of the earlier images also suggest that the images do not add up simply to an affirmation of black identity. Black life is not the only life. And Toomer has elsewhere stated that the black body was in solution, and without the body, the black soul could live only in art. Kousaleos, p. 121, points out that "'The Hole' is the womb which gave birth to slavery." There are many negative overtones in the image of the pregnant Negress.





again, the idea of racial renewal. But all the old associations with this theme plunge once more into doubtful fulfillment when the unborn child's breathing is metaphorically the throbbing song of the night winds: the song repeats the ominous song the winds sang to Kabnis:

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

The unborn child and the torment of Kabnis are drawn together.

Following this bittersweet reminder of the Negro's condition, the narrator focuses on the streets of Sempter. From the description, they are identical to the streets in "Esther":

Sempter's streets are vacant and still. White paint on the wealthier houses has the chill blue glitter of distant stars. Negro cabins are a purple blur. Broad Street is deserted. Winds stir beneath the corrugated iron canopies and dangle odd bits of rope tied to horse- and mule-gnawed hitching-posts (209).

The colors of the houses with their chill cast recall Esther's attempt to darken her mind with cold associations so that she would not be deterred from her purpose. The contrast between the "chill blue glitter" of the white houses, suggesting remoteness, and the blurred purple of the Negro cabins continues to associate the color of dusk with the people. The corrugated iron canopies hint at deformity, especially as they appear in the context with the "horse- and mule-gnawed hitching-posts," the emblem of frustration and defeat.

Down the street, dark figures meet under the metal awnings which form a kind of corridor that echoes and distorts what they say. The confusion of their words refers to their inability to really

communicate: the figures are Halsey, Kabnis, and Lewis, and two ladies of the evening, Stella and Cora (210). They make their way to Halsey's workshop:

The old building is phosphorescent above deep shade. The figures pass through the double door. Night winds whisper in the eaves. Sing weirdly in the ceiling cracks. Stir curls of shavings on the floor. Halsey lights a candle. A good-sized lumber wagon, wheels off, rests upon the blocks. Kabnis makes a face at it. An unearthly hush is upon the place. No one seems to want to talk. To move, lest the scraping of their feet . . . (210).

The sinister aspect of the scene is deepened by the unwholesome glow of the old building, perhaps an allusion to the ghostly wraiths that haunt the southern landscape. This same phosphorescence appears in the trees when Esther tries to shut out distractions from her mind. The eerie "singing" of the winds and their play in various parts of the building recall the haunted atmosphere of Kabnis' cabin in the first scene. The atmosphere also continues the witches' Sabbath quality of the third scene,<sup>19</sup> not only in the sinister semblance, but in the face that Kabnis makes at the lumber wagon.

The descent into "the Hole" where the party is to be held represents an exploration of the submerged consciousness of the black soul. It combines allusions to the hold of a slave ship, to the boxes constricting Negro development, and to the underground races from whom Dan Moore believed the "new-world Christ" would come. But even more, "the Hole" suggests the womb in which that savior would be conceived, a transposition of the "soft belly of a pregnant Negress." In the light of light of Halsey's candle, "The Hole"

---

<sup>19</sup>See above, pp. 241-42, and 10n.

. . . seems huge, limitless. . . . The walls are of stone, wonderfully fitted. They have no openings save a small iron-barred window toward the top of each. They are dry and warm. The ground slopes away to the rear of the building and thus leaves the south wall exposed to the sun. The blacksmith's shop is plumb against the right wall. The floor is clay. Shavings have at odd times been matted into it (210-211).

The impression of size makes the room seem larger than it is. Given the prison-like atmosphere of the stone and bars, the impression of immensity becomes oppressive. The sun-warmed south wall becomes significant in the last scene. . . . The clay floor recalls the red Georgia mud. The wood shavings mixed into it recall the fragmented forest and suggest the mingling of the land and its people.

The crude furnishings of the room include two pine mattresses flanking a table on which there are several candles and an oil lamp. A mirror and a gaudy costume hang nearby. A second table, on which there are whisky glasses and a lamp, and around which there are six chairs, gives a clear idea of the uses to which the room is put. But the arresting feature of the room is a high-backed chair resting on a dais, on which sits the old man previously referred to:

He is like a bust in black walnut. Gray-bearded. Gray-haired. Prophetic. Immobile. Lewis' eyes are sunk in him. The others, unconcerned, are about to pass on to the front table when Lewis grips Halsey and so turns him that the candle flame shines obliquely on the old man's features.

Lewis: And he rules over--

Kabnis: Th smoke an fire of th forge.

Lewis: Black Vulcan? I wouldnt say so. That forehead. Great woolly beard. Those eyes. A mute John the Baptist of a new religion--or a tongue-tied shadow of an old (211).

In the light of the narrator's description of the old man, the shavings on the clay floor suggest the substance from which the old man was carved. The image of the walnut bust also recalls Rhobert as he sinks

into the mud: the narrator calls for a "monument of hewn oaks, carved in nigger-heads" (75). The old man's oracular appearance suggests to Lewis that he looks like some god or prophet. Kabnis interrupts with a pagan figure,<sup>20</sup> but Lewis finds the old man more like a Christian figure. When he learns that the only name the man has is "Father," Lewis christens him "Father John." The prophetic old man also evokes the mental image of Dan Moore as he dreams in the theater: an old man who might have seen the great figures of the Negro's history and the beginnings of the new industrial era. Similar thoughts occur to Lewis, but cast in a religious framework:

Slave boy whom some Christian mistress taught to read  
the Bible. Black man who saw Jesus in the ricefields, and  
began preaching to his people. Moses- and Christ-words  
used for songs. Dead blind father of a muted folk who feel  
their way upward to a life that crushes or absorbs them.  
(Speak, Father!) Suppose your eyes could see, old man.  
(The years hold hands. O Sing!) Suppose your lips . . .  
(212).

The vision of Lewis, as he contemplates the old man, renews the thoughts about a black Messiah. In Father John, Lewis sees an aboriginal slave, a man who first formulated the ideas of the Judeo-Christian beliefs in terms of black expression. Perhaps he was even the originator of one of the first spirituals. Father John would have shared a great moment in black history. But the irony of a man, buried in a hole, yet raised up on a platform, as on a little stage, mute, immobile, is poignantly realized in Lewis' mind. His inner vision of

---

<sup>20</sup>Lieber, 48, interprets the choice offered by Kabnis and Lewis as that between a racial past of impotence or a reawakening of racial pride.

the old man curiously parallels John as he contemplated Dorris, his parenthetical entreaties to the old man to sing, reminiscent of John's parenthetical expressions of ecstasy. And the description of Father John as a "Dead blind father of a muted folk who feel their way upward to a life that either crushes or absorbs them" contains the very thought that Toomer expressed to Liveright in a letter about his future work. The statement has important thematic implications: the men and women in Cane are shown in various stages of being crushed or absorbed.

The women become restless as Lewis contemplates the old man and tries to learn from Halsey and Kabnis whether he has ever spoken. As the women move to the table with chairs and start to play with cards,

Kabnis, with great mock-solemnity, goes to the corner, takes down the robe, and dons it. He is a curious spectacle, acting a part, yet very real (213).

Kabnis continues his role as an imperfect, child-like grotesque human. He still tries to create himself, and the automaton and scarecrow associations still cling to him. The implication that Kabnis is most real when he is playing a part comes as a logical extension of what has already been revealed about him: that in real life he acts a part assigned to him by Halsey or by Hanby. Lewis, alone, is surprised by Kabnis' behavior, and laughs at him, causing Kabnis to shrink and glare "with a furtive hatred" (213-14). As in the scene in the Crimson Gardens, the members of the party cannot enjoy each other, but are withdrawn into themselves for gratification. Even Halsey, who pours "corn licker" into the glasses and drinks, suddenly gets up as if to go, preoccupied with the wagon upstairs. His action is reminiscent of Paul's, when he almost upsets the table at the Crimson Gardens.

Kabnis tries to generate some "good-time spirit to the party," but fails:

Something in the air is too tense and deep for that. Lewis, seated now so that his eyes rest upon the old man, merges with his source and lets the pain and beauty of the South meet him there. White faces, pain-pollen, settle downward through a cane-sweet mist and touch ovaries of yellow flowers. Cotton-bolls bloom, droop. Black roots twist in a parched red soil beneath a blazing sky. Magnolias, fragrant, a trifle futile, lovely, far off . . . His eyelids close. A force begins to heave and rise . . . (214-15).

Lewis' metaphoric merging with the old man, his racial source, compares the faces of white men to pollen and the black, to yellow flowers.<sup>21</sup>

In this way, pain and beauty mingle in his thoughts about the South. The wilting of the cotton-bolls following this fertilization, the twisting of the black roots in the hostile environment, show that the racial fusion is destructive of the Negro. The ornamental Magnolias, lovely, but remote, perfume the dying environment, futilely, as flowers at a funeral. Yet, within, Lewis still hopes. Something within him grows.

While Lewis is lost in inner contemplation, Stella begins to reveal the pain of her existence, an awareness of sin but an inability to avoid it. She is one of the black hybrids with twisted roots. The

---

<sup>21</sup> The image of the twisted roots, the pain pollen, and its metaphoric interpretation is not thoroughly explicated by the commentators who refer to it. Ackley, 60, Lieber, 48, and Reilly, 322, draw attention to it as an important element in the symbolic development of the characters. That the white pollen added to the twisted black roots produces yellow flowers recalls the frequent allusions to yellow as an association with mulatto. It also recalls the third and fourth stanzas of "Georgia Dusk," linking white civilization with the fertilization of black fields. See above, Chapter II, p. 41.

talk turns to the twisted lives of other Negroes, acquaintances. Through it all, Lewis seems rapt. The others ignore him and seem at last to be "working up" a party:

Then Lewis opens his eyes and looks at them. Kabnis chokes his laugh. It sputters, gurgles. His eyes flicker and turn away. He tries to pass the thing off by taking a long drink which he makes considerable fuss over. He is drawn back to Lewis. Seeing Lewis' gaze still upon him, he scowls (216).

Somehow, the force that has welled up in Lewis has communicated itself to the group in the accusatory look. Kabnis is thoroughly disconcerted, and immediately begins to pour out his inner conflict over identity, as if in an attempt to ward off Lewis' eyes. When Lewis asks him if he is satisfied by gratifying his sensuality, Kabnis retorts that only when one becomes as Father John can one be satisfied. But Lewis will not let Kabnis rest:

Lewis: The old man as symbol, flesh, and spirit of the past, what do think [sic] he would say if he could see you?  
 Kabnis: Just like any done-up preacher is what he looks t me. Jam some false teeth in his mouth and crank him, an youd have God Almighty spit in torrents all around the floor. Oh, hell, an he reminds me of that black cockroach over yonder. An besides, he aint my past. My ancestors were Southern blue-bloods-- (217).

Kabnis' comments continue the mechanical, sub-human images begun in the first scene.<sup>22</sup> Again, he tries to place himself above other Negroes by claiming to have purer blood.

This assertion brings a rebuttal from Lewis that leads to important thematic revelations:

---

<sup>22</sup>See above, Chapter V, pp. 227-28.

Lewis: And black.

Kabnis: Aint much difference between blue and black.

Lewis: Enough to draw a denial from you. Cant hold them, can you? Master; slave. Soil; and the overarching heavens. Dusk; dawn. They fight and bastardize you. The sun tint of your cheeks, flame of the great season's multi-colored leaves, tarnished, burned. Split, shredded; easily burned. No use . . . . . (218).

Here, Lewis clarifies the symbolic significance of the dawn and dusk imagery used in Cane: Kabnis is unable to contain them without conflict. In this respect, he is like Louisa, who tries to hold Bob Stone and Tom Burwell, separately, but finds that she cannot. In Kabnis' case, the fight is internalized, and the result is that he is fragmented, like the southern forest, and more easily consumed. Most striking is Lewis' allusion to autumn, the season of harvest, of maturation, of ripening into death, as "the great season." It is multiplicity which weakens Kabnis, making him susceptible to disintegration and fire. The image reverses the vigorous cutting and splitting of the white wood in "Seventh Street." Lewis uses the colorful analogy to point out weakness in Kabnis, rather than strength.

When Lewis turns his eyes to Stella, he draws defiance and grudging admiration. She recognizes something in him that she does not find in the men who usually come to her. Though Halsey knows the truth of what she says, he is a little offended. In an effort to hurt the others by excluding them, he takes Lewis aside for a private talk (219). Whereupon, Kabnis

gets up, pompous in his robe, grotesquely so, and makes as if to go through a grand march with Stella. She shoves him off, roughly, and in a mood swings her body to the steps. Kabnis grabs Cora and parades around, passing the old man, to whom he bows in mock-curtsy. He sweeps by the



table, snatches the licker bottle, and then he and Cora sprawl on the mattresses. She meets his weak approaches after the manner she thinks Stella would use (220).

Kabnis, once more the grotesque, role-playing Halloween clown, mocks the serious matters introduced by Lewis. And when he and Cora sprawl on the mattress, even she does not respond as herself, but rather as she thinks Stella would. Their play is soon interrupted. Halsey, who has begun talking earnestly to Lewis, wants to impress him with his intelligence despite the lack of education, but his mind wanders, and he wonders what Lewis thinks of Kabnis (221-22). Kabnis senses that they are talking about him and leaves Cora, demanding to know what they are saying about him.

Kabnis is still enacting his inner conflicts. Constantly feeling a need to explain himself aloud, apparently more to satisfy himself than others, he begins to boast, claiming that his was a family of orators. As with his claim of blue-blood, this claim is an attempt to bolster his sagging self-concept. An important part of this ritual is the denigration of others:

(He turns to Halsey and begins shaking his finger in his face.) An as f you, youre all right f choppin things from blocks of wood. I was good at that the day I ducked the cradle. An since then, I've been shapin words after a design that [sic] branded here. Know whats here? M soul. Ever heard o that? Th hell y have. Been shapin words t fit m soul. Never told y that before, did I? Thought I couldnt talk. I'll tell y. I've been shapin words; ah, but sometimes theyre beautiful an golden an have a taste that makes them fine t roll over with y tongue. Your tongue aint fit f nothin but t roll an lick hog-meat (223).

Seizing on Halsey's occupation for a metaphor to illustrate his inner feelings, Kabnis points out that his attempts to find words

to fit his soul are sometimes gratifying.<sup>23</sup> But the words he uses on Halsey are harsh and abusive. Halsey suggests that Stella might silence him by pushing Kabnis into a chair. Kabnis, however, has not finished his oratory and jumps back up:

Those words I was tellin' y about, they wont fit int th mold  
thats branded on m soul. Rhyme, y see? Poet, too. Bad  
rhyme. Bad poet. Somethin else youve learned tnight. Lewis  
dont know it all, an I'm atellin y. Ugh. Th form thats  
burned int my soul is some twisted awful thing that crept  
in from a dream, a godam nightmare, and wont stay still un-  
less I feed it. An it lives on words. Not beautiful words.  
God Almighty no. Misshapen, split-gut, tortured, twisted  
words. Layman was feedin it back there that day you thought  
I ran out fearin things. White folks feed it cause their  
looks are words. Niggers, black niggers feed it cause theyre  
evil an their looks are words. Yallar niggers feed it. This  
whole damn bloated purple country feeds it cause its goin  
down t hell in a holy avalanche of words. I want t feed th  
soul . . . but I've got t feed it. I wish t God some lynchin  
white man ud stick his knife through it an pin it to a tree  
(224-25).

This climactic speech shows considerable insight into Kabnis' conflicts. It shows that Kabnis feels that the fine, golden words which he occasionally finds are essentially empty, and that he cannot shape them to his soul because his soul is twisted and ugly. Without realizing it, however, he has equated his soul with the twisted black roots of Lewis' vision. His soul is ugly because it is black, a nightmare creation. And since he likens his soul to a hungry beast, Kabnis must feed it

---

<sup>23</sup>Ackley, 61-62, sees the twist in Kabnis' words as the result of his wish to be white, i.e., black roots cannot produce white identity. But see above, 21n, where Lewis' image suggests that the pain of mingling with the whites might twist the roots and produce yellow flowers. Reilly, 322, sees Kabnis' words as the ravings of a nightmare. Dillard, p. 85, Ellison, p. 142, and Fischer, 210, see in them some form of rejection of the social condition which defines blacks.

with twisted words. . . Thus, he has been trying to shape his soul by shaping beautiful words only to find that his soul is ugly, twisted, misshapen, and dissatisfied with beauty. In trying to become, Kabnis finds himself at odds with what he believes himself to be, and in a transport of self-loathing, wishes that his soul were as the child of Mame Lamkins, transfixed to a tree.

With this poignant wish for self-immolation, Kabnis becomes completely abject. In associating his torment with that of Mame Lamkins, he evokes the suggestive elements of her name: maim, baby lamb. The connotation of crucifixion as a grotesque maiming forms the ultimate inversion of Kabnis' imagination. Even so, this imagination, however tortured, expresses great passion. Typically, Halsey treats Kabnis like a child with a hurt and tries to assuage the pain with a drink. He even encourages Cora to comfort him, and she, sitting on his lap, smothers him with her breasts (225). At first Stella feels contempt:

And then a sudden anger sweeps her. She would like to lash Cora from the place. . . She'd like to take Kabnis to some distant pine grove and nurse and mother him. Her eyes flash. A quick tensioning throws her breasts and neck into a poised strain. She starts towards them. Halsey grabs her arm and pulls her to him. She struggles. Halsey pins her arms and kisses her. She settles, spurring like a pine-knot fire (225).

Kabnis' absurdity has, to some extent, been overridden by the passionate torment. Cora mothers him, but Stella, a more intense, passionate woman, suddenly wishes to mother Kabnis in her stead. The reference to a distant pine grove places her in the context of the vital women who might regenerate the race. But Halsey intervenes, as always, to frustrate and thwart Kabnis. Halsey is not aware of the effect he has on

Kabnis, and really believes that he has his best interests at heart. But here, seeing Stella's passion begin to surface, Halsey can only believe that he has provided for Kabnis and takes Stella for himself.

Lewis, finding himself left out again, his inner glowing subsided and replaced "by a dead chill" (226), is crushed by the weight of the whole place upon him. As Kabnis earlier felt the pressure of the South upon him, so now, does Lewis. Unable to withstand the strain, he bolts from the place and out into the night.<sup>24</sup>

The final scene of "Kabnis" delivers the metaphoric child of the pregnant Negress, the aftermath of the celebration in the cellar. The morning light filtering into the cellar seems to turn the scene into a womb-like ocean in which newly made creatures float about:

The cellar swims in a pale phosphorescence. The table, the chairs, the figure of the old man are amoeba-like shadows which move about and float in it. In the corner under the steps, close to the floor, a solid blackness. A forcible yawn. Part of the blackness detaches itself so that it may be seen against the grayness of the wall. It moves forward and then seems to be clothing itself in odd dangling bits of shadow (226).

---

<sup>24</sup>Fischer, 212, says that Lewis survives the ordeal of "Kabnis": "he has the strength to leave 'the Hole.'" But Kousaleos, p. 125, sees that Lewis "is unable to accept the pain himself . . . ." More directly, Lewis finds himself isolated, unable to communicate to the others in "the Hole" the vision which he perceives. Though his manner of fixing others with his eyes sometimes galvanizes them into restive outpourings, he, himself, says very little about what he sees. And Kabnis, for all his volubility, cannot quite find an inner vision to communicate. The two are a little like Moses and Aaron: Lewis has the profound visions, but few words; Kabnis has the words, but no visions, or at least, his visions are twisted and tortured and imperfectly formed.

Significantly, Halsey is the first to stir. Whether the phosphorescent glow represents the wraith of the dead Messiah or the primeval glow of the ocean out of which life first appeared can make no difference to the practical necessities of the day. He calls the others, who respond with various degrees of protest, Kabnis loudest of all. Still playing the father-figure to Kabnis, Halsey indulges Kabnis by not forcing him up, goes upstairs and starts a fire in the hearth (227-28). He then places some chunks of coal on the fire and becomes absorbed in the wagon. When he comes to himself a little later, the coals are red-hot, and he places them in a bucket which he carries downstairs to warm Kabnis and the girls. As the harbingers of dawn begin to work their way into the Hole, Halsey symbolically warms his friends to life, replacing the "dead chill" that Lewis had felt the night before.

Since the light of dawn has not yet illuminated the cellar sufficiently, Halsey lights candles so that the girls can see:

The girls, before the mirror, are doing up their hair. It is bushy hair that has gone through some straightening process. Character, however, has not all been ironed out. As they kneel there, heavy-eyed and dusky, and throwing grotesque moving shadows on the wall, they are two princesses in Africa going through the early-morning ablutions of their pagan prayers. Finished, they come forward to stretch their hands and warm them over the glowing coals. Red dusk of a Georgia sunset, their heavy, coal-lit faces . . . (229-30).

The amoeba-like shadows now take on definite shapes: the shapes are still fantastic, with some of the protean suggestiveness of the shadows of Kabnis' cabin in the first scene. As African princesses, the girls' ancestral ties emerge in the shadows. When they stretch before the coals, the shapes become diluted girls, "red dusk," rather than purple,

and the color is bestowed by the coals.<sup>25</sup> At this moment, Kabnis says that he remembers that the old man spoke last night. Neither Halsey nor the girls believe him, and they go upstairs to breakfast, leaving Kabnis to himself.

Once more, Kabnis has difficulty rising. This time, his costume trips him. He moves again toward the old man, but falls and lies still for perhaps an hour. . . . The "light of a new sun . . . about to filter through the windows" seems to revive him and makes Father John quite visible. (230). Half-risen on his elbows, Kabnis tries to fathom the old man:

You sit there like a black hound spiked to an ivory pedestal. An all night long I heard you murmurin that devilish word. They thought I didn't hear y, but I did. Mumblin, feedin that ornery thing thats livin on my insides. Father John. Father of Satan, more likely. What does it mean t you? Youre dead already. Death. What does it mean t you? To you who died way back there in th 'sixties. What are y throwin it in my throat for? Whats it goin t get y? A good smashin in th mouth, thats what. My fist'll sink int y black mush face clear t y guts--if y got any. Dont believe y have. Never seen signs of none. Death. Death. Sin an Death. All night long y mumbled death. (He forgets the old man as his mind begins to play with the word and its associations.) Death. . . . these clammy floors . . . just like the place they used t stow away th worn-out, no-count niggers in th days of slavery . . . that was long ago; not so long ago . . . . no windows . . . (231).

Father John haunts Kabnis as surely as if he were dead and a ghostly presence. The image of the old man "spiked" to his pedestal renews the image of the Mame Lamkins baby pinned to the tree. The constant reference to death twists and feeds Kabnis' "insides." Throughout his

---

<sup>25</sup>Cancel, 30, draws special attention to the image of these women bathing in the warmth of their symbolic substance.

speech, Kabnis shows again his twisted, cruel side. As his mind wanders, Kabnis sees in the cellar a replica of the prisons used to confine miscreant slaves, and that association momentarily makes him think that he has been abandoned along with the old man. Next, he sees in the old man a shouter drunk on gin and a preacher's words. Finally, Kabnis asserts that eyes that have seen the beauty of the world can never lose their sight (232). The old man's eyes are "fish eyes," and "fish eyes are dead eyes" (232-33). The metaphor suggests the fish as Christian symbol, and the dead eyes as its blindness.<sup>26</sup> Kabnis denies the visions of Lewis and those which occasionally trouble him.

Kabnis is still spewing forth his twisted, ugly words when he breaks off as someone comes downstairs:

Carrie, bringing food for the old man. She is lovely in her fresh energy of the morning, in the calm untested confidence and nascent maternity which rise from the purpose of her present mission (233).

She is morning and mother, symbols of renewal and hope, but untested, hence naive and innocent. To Kabnis' satirical remarks, she answers simply and guilelessly: she has been sent to fetch Kabnis to help Halsey with the wagon. His retort, "Does he think some wooden thing can lift me up?" plays on his repeated falling and sinking into the

---

<sup>26</sup>Roberta Riley, "Search for Identity," CLA Journal, 17 (June 1974) 482, mentions the importance of the eyes in the metaphoric design of Cane, but she does not specifically mention Father John's eyes. She points out that Kabnis lacks vision, and perhaps Father John's eyes are "dead" only to him. Somehow, Kousaleos, p. 127, finds that Kabnis is a Jesus figure to Carrie. Perhaps that is because she later mothers him. But with the same act, Carrie smothers him (see Chapter V, p. 277), and therefore symbolically buries him as Karintha did her baby.

mud, literally and figuratively. It also alludes to the bungled job Kabnis did on the hatchet handle.<sup>27</sup> But at the moment, it specifically refers to the fact that he is on the floor and not quite sure if he can rise. Seeing that, Carrie offers to help him. Kabnis wonders how she can help, suggesting that she is a mere child. At this suggestion, Carrie denies that she is a child and steps forward to prove it. But Kabnis points out that it is his soul that needs to be lifted up. In typical innocence, Carrie responds that that is because Kabnis neglects church. But Kabnis begins to talk to himself, commenting on Halsey's life upstairs and his own downstairs with the old man.

Hearing Kabnis mention the old man, Carrie asks if he has been talking. Kabnis argues that the old man cannot talk or hear or see, while Carrie maintains that he can perceive with his soul. And while the two argue, the old man begins to stir. He nods his head and mutters the word, "sin," repeating it several times (235-36). Kabnis, forgetting that Carrie is with him, curses the old man and tells him to shut up. When Kabnis tries to get up, Carrie moves to help him, and her touch shocks him back into awareness of her presence:

Kabnis: Carrie! What . . . how . . . Baby, you shouldnt be down here. Ralph says things. Doesnt mean to. But Carrie, he doesnt know what he's talkin about. Couldnt know. It was only a preacher's sin they knew in those old days, an that wasnt sin at all. Mind me, th

---

<sup>27</sup>See Chapter V, pp. 254-55. Kabnis' bungled job on the hatchet also ironically alludes to his earlier statement: "Been shapin words t fit m soul," p. 268. The entire concatenation of images, together with the shavings on the floor, prefigures Kabnis' bondage to the axle and beam, p. 278.



only sin is whats done against th soul. Th whole world is a conspiracy t sin, especially in America, an against me. I'm the victim of their sin. I'm what sin is (235-36).

Kabnis' tender solicitude for Carrie shows how much she means to him. Even though she has denied that she is a child, Kabnis tries to protect her from his twisted nature. The sin against the soul that Kabnis speaks of refers to that twisted nature, the outcome of the racial conflict in America. As before, when he was convinced the lynch mob was after him, Kabnis makes himself the object of the "conspiracy" of sin.<sup>28</sup> His taking sin upon himself, indeed, his statement that he is what sin is, returns to his Christ-like wish that his soul could be impaled against a tree.

Father John begins to speak again, encouraged by Carrie, and heckled by Kabnis. Haltingly, bit by bit, the revelation hoped for by Lewis is uttered:

Father John: Th sin whats fixed . . . upon th white folks . . . f tellin Jesus--lies. O th sin th white folks 'mitted when they made the Bible lie (237).

With exquisite bad timing, Halsey pounds on the floor to summon Kabnis and Father John sinks back into his silence. Carrie is deeply moved, but Kabnis is contemptuous:

So thats your sin. All these years t tell us that th white folks made th Bible lie. Well, I'll be damned. Lewis ought t have been here. You old black fakir-- (238).

---

<sup>28</sup>Reilly, 323, equates this idea with racial oppression. Fischer, 211, equates it with Kabnis' rejection of "shouting," i.e., rejection of black identity, soul. Susan L. Blake, "The Spectatorial Artist and the Structure of *Cane*," *CLA Journal*, 17 (June 1974) 532, says that Kabnis recognizes but cannot accept Father John's "truth." Thus Kabnis' "sin is the rejection of being."

The banal message deeply disappoints Kabnis.<sup>29</sup> His reaction to the obviousness of the message contrasts with the rapt attention commanded by King Barlo when he, too, uttered the obvious. He, too, however, was referred to by the narrator as a "fakir" (37). But Carrie cannot accept Kabnis' sneers:

She turns him to her and takes his hot cheeks in her cool hands. Her palms draw the fever out. With its passing, Kabnis crumples. He sinks to his knees before her, ashamed, exhausted. His eyes squeeze tight. Carrie presses his face tenderly against her. The suffocation of her fresh starched dress feels good to him. Carrie is about to lift her hands in prayer, when Halsey, at the head of the stairs, calls down (238).

As with every major confrontation between Kabnis and the characters in the story, he crumples. Kabnis simply does not have the strength to oppose those whose conviction in their own rightness is greater than his. Even when Kabnis realizes that a conviction may be based on smugness or superstition, his inner torment demoralizes him. Indeed, his confrontations are an external manifestation of his inner conflicts, as he struggles between the beauty and ugliness of the southern milieu show. Kabnis is capable of cynicism and hostility, but his tenderness toward Carrie overcomes any such tendency. Like Dan Moore's genuflection to Muriel, Kabnis shows a willingness to submit in spite of inner conviction or doubt. Carrie, like Cora in the previous scene, suffocates Kabnis. But where Kabnis struggled earlier, he resigns himself

---

<sup>29</sup>Darwin Turner, In a Minor Chord: Three Afro-American Writers and Their Search for Identity (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1971), p. 25, aptly quotes Horatio, "There needs no ghost . . . come from the grave to tell us this."

now, and even enjoys the suffocation. The adoration of woman undergoes a regression to adoration of mother-figure.

But the act of adoration in Cane seldom proceeds uninterrupted: from first to last, some factor, whether an inherent weakness in the man or woman, or a flaw in the circumstances, or a failure in communication, intervenes to prevent men from consummating their love. In each case, a two-sided world operates in the factor. In the present instance, Kabnis is enjoying an experience which, for him, has mythic implications. But the practical-minded Halsey interrupts:

Halsey: Well, well. Whats up? Aint you ever comin? Come on. Whats up down there? Take you all mornin t sleep off a pint? Youre weakenin, man, youre weakenin. Th axle an th beams all ready waitin f y. Come on (238).

The world of commerce and industry grows impatient with the "dreaming nigger." Halsey's reference to weakening is ironically apt. Kabnis is weakening; has indeed been weakening in each of the confrontations he has experienced, and Halsey's reference to the axle and the beam "waiting" for Kabnis has the ring of a yoke waiting for a beast of burden. Halsey's wagon becomes, for Kabnis, one of those things that, like Rhobert's house, crushes him. Kabnis begins to answer the summons, forgetting that he still wears the robe. Carrie points to it and helps him off with it.

In removing the robe, Kabnis removes his dream, his soul:

He hangs it, with an exaggerated ceremony, on its nail in the corner. He looks down on the tousled beds. His lips curl bitterly. Turning, he stumbles over the bucket of dead coals. He savagely jerks it from the floor. And then, seeing Carrie's eyes upon him, he swings the pail carelessly and with eyes downcast and swollen, trudges upstairs to the work-shop (239).

The nail on which Kabnis hangs the robe recalls the nail at Fern's head, and in a larger sense, suggests Mame Lamkins' baby impaled against the tree. It fulfills his wish that some "lynchin white man" would stick his soul to a tree. In a larger sense, it connotes the immolation of Negroes in Lewis' vision who "feel their way upward to a life that crushes or absorbs them" (212). In removing the robe, Kabnis' action alludes to the scarlet robe placed on Jesus, then exchanged for his own dress, just before the crucifixion: Kabnis impales his soul on the nail; his body will be pinned to Halsey's axle and beam. The robe was a badge of his office as orator, teacher, and poet. Halsey's overalls are his new dress. The dead coals, like Lewis' ashen eyelids and the fagot-eyes of "Portrait in Georgia," connote Kabnis consumed. Kabnis will be "tethered" like the mules.

After Kabnis leaves, Carrie kneels before Father John and invokes her savior:

"Jesus, come."

Light streaks through the iron-barred cellar window.  
Within its soft circle, the figures of Carrie and Father John.

Outside, the sun arises from its cradle in the tree-tops of the forest. Shadows of pines are dreams the sun shakes from its eyes. The sun arises. Gold-glowing child, it steps into the sky and sends a birth-song slanting down gray dust streets and sleepy windows of the southern town (239).

The light streaking through the iron bars more than ever suggests a prison, and Carrie, sharing the circle of light, imprisoned with the old man. Yet outside, the pregnant Negress, night, has given birth at last. The gold-glowing child replaces the pale, moon-child. The dreams of pines, the "nigger dreams" of dusk and night, it shakes away.

The final scene of the book juxtaposes images of blind faith and freedom.<sup>30</sup> In its suggestion of Lewis' vision of a blazing sky indifferent to the twisted black roots which hunger and thirst but can never be satisfied, it provides incisive irony. It parallels and reverses the conclusion of "Avey," where Avey is reduced to the level of a child, sleeping, while the "crimson-splashed beauty" of the dawn suffuses the sky (88).

The ambiguity of the final passages suggests that the condition of the Negro has not yet been determined. Kabnis, as a composite of the male figures in Cane, is still twisted. In his yielding to Carrie and Halsey, he has been reduced to the level of a child. In this respect, he is like Avey. Carrie, raised to the level of Virgin Mother, only smothers and further represses him. Her suffocation of Kabnis recalls Karintha's burial of her baby in the sawdust pile. Carrie, in her simple acceptance of a religion from the slave past, appears to regress. The question which Lewis raised concerning Father John, whether he might be "a mute John the Baptist of a new religion--

---

<sup>30</sup>Dillard, pp. 90-91, sees in the juxtaposition a personal despair for Kabnis, but not necessarily for the race. She also says that the "narrator views the 'new Negro,' the one who is moving rapidly into the confines of civilized society, with repulsion; the beauty lies with the fading 'song-lit' race." But Toomer does not view the emerging hybrid, dissolving race with repulsion. He expresses regret for the loss of the "song-lit" race, and he is impatient with the commercial, alienated society into which the race is vanishing. The characters Toomer despises are the Mrs. Pribbys and the Samuel Hanbys who clearly place their own interests above human interests, and do so under the guise of humanitarian concern. For the others, the tone of Cane clearly expresses compassion, regret, elegy.

or a tongue-tied shadow of an old" (211), has been answered by the old man's muttered words to Kabnis and Carrie: Father John has nothing new to say. But Carrie finds his "soul sight" miraculous. Thus she represents racial stagnation rather than a fulfillment of the Madonna who will regenerate the race. Neither she nor Kabnis develops the "awakening" hinted at in "Prayer" and in "Bona and Paul."

From this understanding of "Kabnis" and its relation to the other parts of *Cane*, we can see that the cyclical nature of the black experience as portrayed by Toomer is not a static return to a previous condition. All through the book, his images have evolved and proliferated, as if the substance of the black experience were so many malleable bits which, in combining and dissociating and recombining, are subtly altered in the mind of the narrator, clearly a spokesman for himself. The larger movement of the book, from South to North, and South again, is not simply linear motion. At each stage, there are new insights and progressive--and sometimes regressive--changes reflected in the characters. The gradual withdrawal of the narrator from direct involvement in the fate of the black race as race, and his allusion to a higher reality than race, suggests that Toomer is not affirming the concept of a black renaissance.

What Toomer projects, through the kaleidoscopic consciousness of his narrator, is an elegiac celebration of what has ceased to be as a pure entity, something which was fine and beautiful, and which, in its power to capture the imagination, almost convinces one that it may be again. Cane projects the black race as dusk which, even as the narrator beholds it and celebrates it, vanishes into night. The day

which dawns after that night is no longer the black race, but the day of the black race crushed or absorbed into a new plane of existence. Toomer, then, does not herald the Harlem Renaissance, which sought to capture in art what was essentially black in the racial soul; Cane shows the soul "in solution," incommunicable through art, and finally, beyond art. Perhaps Toomer's artistic purpose sprang from the same desire as that of the Harlem Renaissance, to celebrate and affirm the black ethos. But, sprung, the paths are quite different: the Harlem Renaissance celebrated a birth; Toomer celebrated a death.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ackley, Donald G. "Theme and Vision in Jean Toomer's Cane," Studies in Black Literature, 1 (Winter 1970) 45-60.
- Bell, Bernard W. "The Afroamerican Novel and Its Tradition" (University of Massachusetts, 1970) unpubl. diss.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "A Key to the Poems in Cane," CLA Journal, 14 (March 1971) 251-58.
- Blackwell, Louise. "Jean Toomer's Cane and Biblical Myth," CLA Journal, 17 (June 1974) 535-42.
- Blake, Susan L. "The Spectatorial Artist and the Structure of Cane," CLA Journal, 17 (June 1974) 516-34.
- Bone, Robert A. The Negro Novel in America, rev. ed. Princeton: Yale University Press, 1965.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Review of Cane, NYTBR, January 19, 1969, pp. 3, 34.
- Bontemps, Arna. "The Negro Renaissance: Jean Toomer and the Harlem Writers of the 1920's," in Anger and Beyond, ed. Herbert Hill. New York: Harper & Row, 1966. PP. 20-36.
- Cancel, Rafael A. "Male and Female Interrelationship in Toomer's Cane," Negro American Literature Forum, 5 (Spring 1971) 25-31.
- Chase, Patricia. "The Women in Cane," CLA Journal, 14 (March 1971) 259-73.
- Christian, Barbara. "Spirit Bloom in Harlem. The Search for a Black Aesthetic During the Harlem Renaissance: The Poetry of Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, and Jean Toomer" (Columbia University, 1970) unpubl. diss.
- DAB, ed. Dumas Malone. New York: Charles Scribners and Sons, 1934. P. 611.
- Dillard, Mabel M. "Jean Toomer: Herald of the Negro Renaissance" (Ohio University, 1967) unpubl. diss.
- Duncan, Bowie, "Jean Toomer's Cane: A Modern Black Oracle," CLA Journal, 15 (March 1972) 323-33.



- Durham, Frank, comp. Studies in Cane. Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill, 1971.
- Ellison, Curtis William. "Black Adam: The Adamic Assertion and the Afro-American Novelist" (University of Minnesota, 1970) unpubl. diss.
- Farrison, W. Edward. "Jean Toomer's Cane Again," CLA Journal, 15 (March 1972) 295-302.
- Fischer, William C. "The Aggregate Man in Jean Toomer's Cane," Studies in the Novel, 3 (Summer 1971) 190-215.
- Fisher, Alice Poindexter. "The Influence of Ouspensky's Tertium Organum upon Jean Toomer's Cane," CLA Journal, 17 (June 1974) 504-15.
- Goede, William J. "Tradition in the American Negro Novel" (University of California, Riverside, 1967) unpubl. diss.
- Grant, Sister M. Kathryn. "Images of Celebration in Cane," Negro American Literature Forum, 5 (Spring 1971) 32-34, 36.
- Hayashi, Susanna Campbell. "Dark Odyssey: Descent into the Underworld in Black American Fiction" (Indiana University, 1971) unpubl. diss.
- Helbling, Mark I. "Primitivism and the Harlem Renaissance" (University of Minnesota, 1972) unpubl. diss.
- Huggins, Nathan Irvin. Harlem Renaissance. New York: Oxford University Press, 1972.
- Innes, Catherine L. "The Unity of Jean Toomer's Cane," CLA Journal, 15 (March 1972) 306-22.
- Kopf, George. "The Tensions in Jean Toomer's 'Theater,'" CLA Journal 17 (June 1974) 498-503.
- Kousaleos, Peter G. "A Study of the Language, Structure, and Symbolism in Jean Toomer's Cane and N. Scott Momaday's House Made of Dawn" (Ohio University, 1973) unpubl. diss.
- Kraft, James. "Jean Toomer's Cane," Markham Review, 2 (October 1970) 61-63.
- Krasny, Michael Jay. "Jean Toomer and the Quest for Consciousness" (University of Wisconsin, 1972) unpubl. diss.

- Lieber, Todd. "Design and Movement in Cane," CLA Journal, 13 (September 1969) 35-50.
- Matthews, George C. "Toomer's Cane: The Artist and His World," CLA Journal, 17 (June 1974) 543-99.
- McKeever, Benjamin F. "Cane as Blues," Negro American Literature Forum, 4 (July 1970) 61-63.
- Reilly, John M. "The Search for Black Redemption: Jean Toomer's Cane," Studies in the Novel, 2 (Fall 1970) 312-24.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Jean Toomer: An Annotated Checklist of Criticism," Resources for American Literary Study, 4 (Spring 1974) 27-56.
- Riley, Roberta. "Search for Identity and Artistry," CLA Journal, 17 (June 1974) 480-85.
- Scruggs, Charles W. "The Mark of Cain and the Redemption of Art: A Study in Theme and Structure of Jean Toomer's Cane." AL, 44 (May 1972) 276-91.
- Stein, Marian L. "The Poet Observer and Fern in Jean Toomer's Cane," Markham Review, 2 (October 1970) 64-65.
- Toomer, Jean. Cane. New York: Harper & Row, 1969.
- Toomer Collection, Fisk University.
- Trade Mark Register of the United States. Washington, D.C.: Patent Searching Service, #77,779.
- Turner, Darwin T. "The Failure of a Playwright," CLA Journal, 10 (June 1967) 308-18.
- \_\_\_\_\_. In a Minor Chord: Three Afro-American Writers and Their Search for Identity. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1971.
- Waldron, Edward E. "The Search for Identity in Jean Toomer's 'Esther,'" CLA Journal, 14 (March 1971) 277-80.
- Watkins, Patricia. "Is There a Unifying Theme in Cane?" CLA Journal, 15 (March 1972) 303-05.
- Westerfield, Hargis. "Jean Toomer's 'Fern': A Mythical Dimension," CLA Journal, 14 (March 1971) 274-76.



Typed and Printed in the U.S.A.  
Professional Thesis Preparation  
Cliff and Paula Haughey  
144 Maplewood Drive  
East Lansing, Michigan 48823  
Telephone (517) 337-1527