"[*Cane*] has been reverberating in me to an astonishing degree. *I love it passionately;* could not possibly exist without it." —Alice Walker

cane

Jean Toomer

JEAN TOOMER

CANE

With an Introduction by

DARWIN T. TURNER

UNIVERSITY OF IOWA

Oracular.
Redolent of fermenting syrups.
Purple of the dusk,
Deep-rooted cane.

LIVERIGHT NEW YORK

To my grandmother . . .

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Introduction

by *Darwin T. Turner*

The publication of *Cane* (1923) brought wider attention to a new presence in American literature—twenty-eight-year-old Jean Toomer, who, in less than eighteen months, had attracted an enthusiastic following among a select circle of prominent editors, critics, and authors. In the foreword to *Cane*, Waldo Frank, a well-known novelist and social critic, declared:

> A poet has arisen among our American youth who has known how to turn the essences of materials of his Southland into the essences and materials of literature. . . . The fashioning of beauty is ever foremost in his inspiration. . . . He has made songs and lovely stories of his land. . . . [*Cane*] is a harbinger of a literary force of whose incalculable future I believe no reader of this book will be in doubt.

Earlier Lola Ridge, editor of *Broom*, had predicted that Toomer would be the most widely discussed author of his generation, which is remembered now for such individuals as Sherwood Anderson, Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and William Faulkner. John McClure, editor of *Double Dealer*, had favorably compared Toomer's lyricism with Sherwood Anderson's. Anderson himself had acclaimed Toomer as the only Negro "to have consciously the artist's impulse." A reading of *Cane* added literary critics Robert Littell and Allen Tate, among others, to the list of Toomer's admirers.

Afro-American literary critics endorsed Toomer as fervently as others had. In 1925 William Stanley Braithwaite, widely known for his anthologies of magazine verse, concluded an essay on the history of Afro-American writers:

> In Jean Toomer, the author of *Cane*, we come upon the very first artist of the race, who with all an artist's passion and sympathy for life, its hurts, its sympathies, its desires, its joys, its defeats and strange yearnings, can write about the Negro without the surrender or the compromise of the author's vision. . . . *Cane* is a book of gold and bronze, of dusk and flame, of ecstasy and pain, and Jean Toomer is a bright morning star of a new day of the race in literature.

Braithwaite knew that Toomer was not the first Afro-American to earn a significant literary reputation. As early as the eighteenth century, Phillis Wheatley, an African slave in Boston, elicited praise for *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773). William Wells Brown, a fugitive slave, wrote a novel, *Clotel* (1853), which reputedly rivaled Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) in popularity among Union soldiers during the Civil War. Frances E. W. Harper's poetry sold widely during the Civil War era; and Charles W. Chesnutt, before becoming a novelist, pub-

lished short stories in *The Atlantic*, one of the more exclusive, highly priced periodicals of the late nineteenth century. Paul Laurence Dunbar was one of America's most popular poets at the beginning of the twentieth century. There had been others—poets, novelists, essayists. Yet Jean Toomer's star sparkled high above these, a signal light for the writers of the Harlem Renaissance, as the North Star had been for their ancestors a century earlier.

Predicting a destined greatness, Waldo Frank described Toomer's future as "incalculable," a choice of words that proved ironically prophetic. Like a nova, Toomer's literary career exploded into brilliance with *Cane*, then faded from the view of all but the few who continuously scanned the literary galaxy. Although he published a few essays, poems, and stories during more than thirty years of subsequent effort, he never again sold a book to a commercial publisher. Time, however, has restored his reputation, and *Cane* is more widely read than it was while Toomer lived. Printed initially in a small quantity and reprinted only once during Toomer's life, *Cane*, now in the third edition of the past eight years, is the most frequently studied, the most respected of all the books of the Harlem Renaissance; and Jean Toomer is ranked among the finest artists in the history of Afro-American literature.

This recent recognition, however, carries an irony. After *Cane*, Toomer resisted identification with any race except the new one—the American race —that he envisioned coming to birth on the North American continent. A mixture of several races and nationalities, an individual who could be identified as an Indian or a dark-skinned European, Toomer argued that a Black label or a white label restricted one's access to both groups and limited one's growth. As evidence he bitterly cited publishers' rejections of his writings after *Cane*. Identifying him as Negro, he argued, they expected and desired nothing except a duplicate of his earlier work. Today, however, Toomer's reputation stands at a zenith primarily because he was "discovered" by numbers of scholars and students during the 1960s, when interest in Black consciousness impelled many Americans to search for Black literary treasures even more avidly than the generation of the twenties had sought young Afro-American writers to sponsor.

Unfortunately, the very fact that *Cane* was revived during that storm of Black consciousness has prompted a misunderstanding of the author and, to a slighter degree, has blurred a vision of the various themes—in addition to Black life—that permeate the work. Poetically ambiguous, *Cane* may appear to be a jungle through which original trails can be hacked by readers seeking their own myths and symbols. In a major sense, however, it is a landscape conceived and designed by a man who struggled for greatness but believed that he had experienced only failure; a man who wished to guide, to teach, to lead; a man whose thoughts did not end with racial issues, but swirled through naturalism, socialism, atheism, Christianity, Eastern teachings, occultism, history, psychology; and, above all, a man whose actual perceptions of women and of Black life in the South seem paradoxically different from those sometimes inferred from sentimental readings of *Cane*. Thus, to see *Cane* clearly, one needs first to look at its author.

Much of what is known about Toomer's family background and early life

must be taken from his unpublished autobiographies, which I have used for this introduction. Frequently, his recollections conflict with the facts or with the memories of others in the Pinchback family. In such instances, however, fantasy may prove more important than truth; for Toomer's distortions reflect his own assessment of the significant influences on his life.

Nathan Eugene (later, Jean) Toomer was born December 26, 1894, only one day after the date which Christians celebrate as the anniversary of the birth of Jesus, the Messiah—a coincidence that may have intensified in significance for Toomer years afterwards when he undertook a comparable mission of reform in his varied roles as teacher, counselor, and spiritual leader. Named "Nathan" after a father whom he scarcely can have known, Toomer glamorized his sire as a handsome, elegant man who, the son of a wealthy plantation owner in Georgia, "had the air of a southern aristocrat of the old stamp." Jean Toomer's romanticism also colors his narrative of his father's courtship: the elder Toomer dazzled Nina Pinchback, temporarily wrested her from the control of her tyrannical and possessive father, but was driven off before the birth of his first child. This heroic portrait of Toomer's father is sullied by the Pinchbacks' suspicions that Nathan Toomer, merely a slave woman's impoverished son, married Nina Pinchback with the hope that she could finance his extravagances but deserted her as soon as he discovered that her father, Pinckney B. S. Pinchback, tightly controlled the family fortunes.

Regardless of the accuracy, Toomer's conceptualization of his father suggests reasons not only for his choice of agriculture as a major in college and his adult desire for farmland, but even for his ability in *Cane* to observe Black life in the South with that detachment and objectivity which impressed Waldo Frank, Braithwaite, and other early reviewers of *Cane*. If Toomer identified emotionally with the plantation-owner class, perhaps he subconsciously established distance between himself and the Black peasants. Furthermore, his loss of his father may have motivated his attraction to various father figures in his life.

In his early years in the Pinchback home, where his mother had been forced to return, Toomer—now called Eugene Pinchback—developed attitudes which seem to have influenced his adult behavior. Living in an affluent neighborhood where, as far as he remembered, no one worried about racial identity, Toomer enjoyed the companionship of children his age, frolicked in their pranks and sports, and assumed the role of a Napoleonic leader until a prolonged illness separated him from his companions while he was in the fourth grade. When he discovered that new leaders had replaced him during his absence, Toomer reacted in a manner foreshadowing his subsequent actions whenever he suspected or anticipated failure: withdrawing from the group, he became a detached observer.

Not an ideal retreat for a youth isolated from his peers, the Pinchback household was ruled by the almost legendary P.B.S., who, since 1868—the year of his daughter Nina's birth—had figured prominently and controversially in politics. A crusader for rights for Blacks, the only Negro known to have served as acting governor of Louisiana, twice denied a seat in the

United States Senate because of allegedly fraudulent elections, Pinchback in 1890 had moved his family from their mansion in New Orleans to Washington, D.C., where despite ebbing fortunes he continued to command public respect, as Toomer recalled admiringly and perhaps enviously. Although Pinchback's concern for Blacks aligned him with "radicals" in politics, at home, Toomer asserted, he was a conservative who demanded strictness, order, and religious observance of the conventions and moralities. As evidence of Pinchback's dictatorial practices, Toomer recounted Pinchback's effort to curtail his son Bismarck's habit of reading late at night:

> Grandfather did not object to the reading, at least not openly, though I suppose he felt both anger and regret seeing a son of his at the prime of life spending so much time in bed. But, with his mania for petty economy, he did loudly and strongly object to Bismarck burning gas after ten o'clock. Perhaps his inner disappointment found vent in this curious small way. At any rate, he stormed against the large gas bill. If he passed Bis's room after ten o'clock and saw a light coming from it he would rap sharply, open the door, raise the very devil, and demand that the light be turned out. So Bis had to devise a means of outwitting the old gentleman.

But the same man who fretted about minor expenditures enjoyed luxury and, loving his children, permitted them—especially Nina—to cultivate a similar taste.

In this atmosphere, undoubtedly often uncomfortable for a mischievous, stubborn child who blamed his grandfather for his father's disappearance, Toomer derived comfort from his mother and his grandmother, but turned for inspiration and guidance to his Uncle Bismarck, whom he perhaps identified subconsciously as a substitute father. During frequent visits to Bismarck's room in the evenings, he acquired a vision of the nature of "the good life":

> This position—my uncle in bed surrounded by the materials of a literary man—was impressed upon me as one of the desirable positions in life. It is no wonder that later on I responded positively to pictures of Robert Louis Stevenson and other writers spending most of their lives in bed. Nor is it surprising that in time I inclined to a career which would let me live this way if I wanted to.

Artistic, meditative Bismarck did more than provide a physical model; he stimulated Toomer's interests in science, reading (as a pleasure in itself), history, myths, fables, folk tales, adventures, and romances. From Bismarck he learned more, Toomer insisted, than from his formal education in school.

After an unsuccessful effort to live in New York with his mother and her second husband, whom he despised, Toomer returned to Washington, to live with Uncle Bismarck. For the first time, the fourteen-year-old experienced life in a "colored" neighborhood, where racial distinctions determined allegiances. Characteristically, even at this age he remained neutral when Blacks and whites confronted each other.

After high school years during which he proved more restless than studious, fell in and out of love, worried about sex, and turned to physical exercise to discipline and strengthen himself, Toomer in the summer of 1914 en-

rolled at the University of Wisconsin to study agriculture. At that time, Toomer later wrote in an unpublished autobiography, he formulated his views about his racial composition and his racial attitudes. Aware of America's practice of dichotomizing life into Black and white, Toomer resolved to say as little as possible about his race when he entered the predominantly white world of Madison, Wisconsin:

> In my body were many bloods, some dark blood, all blended in the fire of six or more generations. I was, then, either a new type of man or the very oldest. In any case I was inescapably myself. . . . If I achieved greatness of human stature, then just to the degree that I did I would justify *all* the blood in me. If I proved worthless, then I would betray all. In my own mind I could not see the dark blood as something quite different and apart. But if people wanted to say this dark blood was Negro blood and if they then wanted to call me a Negro—this was up to them. Fourteen years of my life I had lived in the white group, four years I had lived in the colored group. In my experience there had been no main difference between the two. But if people wanted to isolate and fasten on those four years and to say that therefore I was colored, this too was up to them. . . . I determined what I would do. To my real friends of both groups, I would, at the right time, voluntarily define my position. As for people at large, naturally I would go my way and say nothing unless the question was raised. If raised, I would meet it squarely, going into as much detail as seemed desirable for the occasion. Or again, if it was not the person's business I would either tell him nothing or the first nonsense that came into my head.

Repelled by agricultural studies and alienated from classmates because, anticipating defeat, he had withdrawn from the race for presidency of the freshman class, Toomer left Wisconsin at the close of the fall term. For the student of Toomer's literature, the episode at Wisconsin has significance mainly as the first episode in Toomer's four-year trek through various schools and as a source for an unpublished short story, "Withered Skin of Berries," the triangle of a young Afro-American woman passing for white, a white male bigot who is courting her, and an athletic, poetic, mystical young man who is sometimes suspected of being an Indian.

After an abortive registration at the Massachusetts College of Agriculture, Toomer, deciding to take advantage of his athletic abilities and his interest in body building, enrolled in the American College of Physical Training in Chicago, a brief but enjoyable experience which furnished the background material later utilized in "Bona and Paul." Reconsidering the desirability of a future as a "mere gym instructor," however, Toomer in the fall of 1916 registered for biology courses at the University of Chicago to prepare for a medical career, but again was diverted from his proposed program. Newly converted to socialism, in which he saw an "intelligible scheme of things" that "evoked and promised to satisfy all in me that had been groping for form amid the disorder and chaos of my personal experience," Toomer discarded friends and studies as he zealously carried the message of socialism to all who would listen. Further inspired by a lecture by Clarence Darrow, whose atheism shattered Toomer's former concept of a religious universe,

Toomer, foreshadowing the "teach-ins" of a future generation, secured permission to use a room at the College of Physical Training for evening lectures on socialism, evolution, society, Victor Hugo, the origin of the universe, and the intelligence of women. The lectures ended, he recalled, because his concept of women's intelligence offended female listeners, especially the dean of women.

Just as Toomer's views about race must be examined closely because of the current interest in *Cane* as a presentation of Black life, so his ideas about women must be scrutinized because of the significance of women in that book. The presence of women as the major characters, the most memorable individuals, of *Cane* is not accidental. Throughout his writing and his teaching Toomer emphasized the importance of liberating women from the restrictions imposed by society. Indeed, some of his writing appears to originate from a desire to promulgate that message. One wonders how such a zealous reformer might offend the very group he proposed to assist.

Unfortunately, his autobiographies do not reveal the details of his commentary on the intelligence of women or the bases of their objections, but a reasonable theory may be inferred from other works. In "The Sacred Factory," an unpublished expressionistic drama, Toomer asserts more explicitly than in any other fictional work his thesis that Woman is heart and intuition whereas Man is mind and logic. An appropriate relationship of Man and Woman, therefore, fuses the separate entities into a functioning totality. His thesis obviously suggests women's inferiority in intellectual reasoning and the use of logic; in justice to Toomer, however, one must suspect that he undoubtedly would have been, or was, astonished by the opposition—as he was naively startled later by American reactions to his views about race and about interracial marriages. From his perspective, his view of women was not condescending; in fact, he frequently explained that he did not consider a command of logic sufficient—men need to develop intuition also—and that he considered the female element as essential as the male is. Regardless of Toomer's interpretation, there is little doubt that his theory would provoke opposition then and now. It may, however, constitute a position from which to view the women of *Cane*, who seem motivated by feeling rather than reason.

No longer interested in studies at the University of Chicago or at the American College, Toomer returned to Washington for the now customary winter hibernation. There, a reading of Lester Ward's *Dynamic Sociology*, a desire to earn the Ph.D. degree which he believed prerequisite to the life of a scholar, and perhaps the warmths of spring and an impatient grandfather rekindled his energies. The following summer, 1917, he enrolled in New York University, where almost immediately he decided that sociology courses were too dull. Equally disillusioned by the slow comprehension of his younger, less mature classmates in history classes at the City College of New York, where he registered that fall, Toomer had begun to speculate about the study of psychology as a fundamental approach to life when the excitement of the First World War and his fear that the draft would interrupt his studies motivated him to withdraw from school near the close of the term.

After both the army and the Red Cross rejected him, Toomer, unwilling to return to school, sold Ford automobiles in Chicago, taught briefly as a substitute physical education director in Milwaukee, and finally settled with the Acker, Merrall and Conduit Company in New York City in the spring of 1918.

Soon he was undermined by the characteristic frenzy with which he plunged into new interests. In the hours after work Toomer practiced writing literature. Then, believing music to be a more natural form of expression for him, he began to study it intensively. When he added a physical education job at the University Settlement and many evening lectures to youths of the settlement, the schedule caused a severe breakdown, in late fall of 1918. While recuperating, Toomer experienced a mania for writing, an excitement that seemed to resolve his questions about the appropriate career. After one final chaotic year marked by abrupt, periodic returns to and departures from Washington, interrupted by an abortive effort to teach socialism to shipyard workers, and highlighted by his introduction to a literary circle that included Lola Ridge, Edwin Arlington Robinson, and Waldo Frank, Toomer, now calling himself "Jean," returned to Washington in summer, 1920, to prepare himself for a career as a writer.

For the next two years he studied the literature of Waldo Frank, Sherwood Anderson, Van Wyck Brooks, Robert Frost, Carl Sandburg, and the Imagists. He immersed himself in Buddhist philosophy, Eastern teachings, Christian Scriptures, and occultism. He exhausted himself with his own literary efforts, completing a "trunkful" of essays, articles, poems, stories, reviews—few of them submitted, none published.

Living regularly in an Afro-American world for the first time in six years, Toomer engrossed himself with racial matters while he tried to advise two friends—Harry Kennedy and Mae Wright—who were embittered by the conditions of Black life in the United States. In order to deepen his understanding, he read books on race and the race problem; but he decided that most taught a nonsense that merely reflected the authors' prejudices and preferences. Seeking to clarify and reformulate his own racial attitudes, he wrote essays on the subject. In a poem, "The First American," he introduced his idea that America was transforming the old races into a new race, of which he was the first conscious member—a thesis he expanded later in "The Blue Meridian," a much longer poem. During these years from 1920 to 1922 Toomer probably immersed himself in Afro-American consciousness more deeply than he had during any earlier period, more in fact than he ever would again.

Enervated by his own activities and by the strain of caring for his ailing grandfather, Toomer in late summer of 1921 gratefully accepted an invitation to serve temporarily as the head of an industrial and agricultural school for Negroes while the principal of the school scoured the North for financial support. There, in Sparta, Georgia, Toomer unearthed the substance suitable for the medium he was perfecting, as he later explained in a letter to *The Liberator* magazine:

> From my own point of view I am naturally and inevitably an American. I have strived for a spiritual fusion analogous to the fact of racial intermingling. Without denying a single element in me, with no desire to subdue one to the other, I have sought to let them function as complements. I have tried to let them live in harmony. Within the last two or three years, however, my growing need for artistic expression has pulled me deeper and deeper into the Negro group. And as my powers of receptivity increased, I found myself loving it in a way that I could never love the other. It has stimulated and fertilized whatever creative talent I may contain within me. A visit to Georgia last fall was the starting point of almost everything of worth that I have done. I heard folk-songs come from the lips of Negro peasants. I saw the rich dusk beauty that I had heard many false accents about, and of which til then, I was somewhat skeptical. And a deep part of my nature, a part that I had repressed, sprang suddenly to life and responded to them. Now, I cannot conceive of myself as aloof and separated. My point of view has not changed; it has deepened, it has widened.

On the train returning to Washington, Toomer began writing sketches, stories, and poems meditating on his experiences in Georgia. Soon after the first of these had been accepted by *The Double Dealer*, *The Liberator*, and *Broom*, Toomer sent a collection of his best to Waldo Frank. When Frank offered the hoped-for encouragement, Toomer proposed a book of his work:

> Now I wanted a book published as I wanted nothing else. I wanted it because it would be a substantial testament of my achievement, and also because I felt that it would lead me from the cramped conditions of Washington which I had outgrown, into the world of writers and literature. I saw it as my passport to this world.
>
> But I had not enough for a book. I had at most a hundred typed pages. These were about Georgia. It seemed that I had said all I had to say about it. So what, then? I'd fill out. The middle section of "Cane" was thus manufactured.

Cane is generally adjudged the literary masterpiece of the Harlem or "New Negro" Renaissance, a brief but glittering period during the 1920s when America interested itself in Afro-American art and culture as never before, and when Afro-American artists, proud of their racial identity, saw themselves as a vanguard moving towards full participation in American society. The total significance of *Cane*, however, can be understood only when it is perceived both as a harbinger of that Renaissance and as an illumination of significant psychological and moral concerns of the early 1920s.

The glamour of the Renaissance shines vividly from memories of what F. Scott Fitzgerald called "The Jazz Age." For white America the symbol was jazz, carried from the bordellos of New Orleans' famed Storyville district, first by the Original Dixieland Jass [sic] Band, then by the Black musicians themselves when, after Storyville was closed in 1917, they joined the stream of Blacks migrating north to seek jobs created by wartime needs. Hot, rich, raucous, sensual, alive, redolent with suggestions of emotionalism, primitivism, and savagery, jazz fit the mood of many young, Freudian-inspired

Americans shattering the chains of a prim past. Self-conscious couples braved dusky, Prohibition-defying night spots to listen to the music of Joe "King" Oliver, Fletcher Henderson, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, and others. Audiences thronged Broadway theaters for the joyous singing and abandoned dancing of *Shuffle Along* (1921), a musical written, performed, and directed by Blacks—Flournoy Miller, Aubrey Lyles, Eubie Blake, and Noble Sissle. Dancers flung themselves into the acrobatics of the Charleston, popularized by *Running Wild* (1923), a musical by Miller and Lyles. Jazz infiltrated the rhythms of such poets as Vachel Lindsay, Carl Sandburg, and E. E. Cummings; it permeated the consciousness of F. Scott Fitzgerald and his fictional sheiks and flappers; it set tempo to such drama as John Dos Passos's *The Garbage Man* [*The Moon Is a Gong*] (1926); it furnished subject matter for a new talking picture, *The Jazz Singer*. Jazz was not merely sound and rhythm; it was a life-style. And, despite the popularity and the commercial success of white musicians, most devotées knew that jazz was Black.

Black people themselves became themes and subjects of interest for an extraordinary number of white American writers climbing to prominence in the 1920s. With a Black as example, Eugene O'Neill dramatized the power of terror to strip away man's veneer of civilization (*The Emperor Jones*, 1920). Among his explorations of Americans' sexual duels and desires, O'Neill included the conflict within an interracial marriage (*All God's Chillun Got Wings*, 1924). Believing white Americans to be too inhibited, Sherwood Anderson pictured Blacks as innocent, laughing primitives for whom sexual desire is a natural condition of life (*Dark Laughter*, 1925); and William Faulkner contrasted the stolid stability of Blacks with the neurotic sensitivities of whites (*The Sound and the Fury*, 1929). Dubose Heyward (*Porgy*, 1925), Paul Green, and Julia Peterkin described the "primitive" existences of Black peasants in South Carolina, North Carolina, and Virginia. Carl van Vechten titillated readers with the exoticism of Black life in Harlem's nightclubs and soirées (*Nigger Heaven*, 1926). These are only a few of the better-known white American authors who during the 1920s conceived Black Americans as an integral element of their literature.

Explanations of this awakened interest in Black people and Black culture are various. Inferring from the Black jazz, dancing, and singing a corresponding sexual abandon, some Americans undoubtedly presumed that Blacks personified the uninhibited behavior which many whites sought, or professed to seek, for themselves. Other Americans saw in Black peasantry a "noble savage"—simple, close-to-nature, unaffected by the materialism rapidly transforming America from a land of farmers and craftsmen into a society of assembly-line workers. Still others may have looked at Blacks as a group whose needs should be attended to as evidence of America's commitment to the humanitarian sentiments which President Woodrow Wilson had articulated to justify America's participation in World War I.

Obviously, however, the Harlem Renaissance could not have existed without Blacks who shaped and perfected it while regarding it from a different perspective. For many whites the Renaissance was symbolized by the illusion which James Weldon Johnson described in *Black Manhattan* (1930).

> Harlem is known in Europe and the Orient, and it is talked about by natives in the interior of Africa. It is farthest known as being exotic, colourful [sic], and sensuous; a place of laughing, singing, and dancing; a place where life wakes up at night. This phase of Harlem's fame is most widely known because, in addition to being spread by ordinary agencies, it has been proclaimed in story and song. And certainly this is Harlem's most striking and fascinating aspect. New Yorkers and people visiting New York from the world over go to the night-clubs of Harlem and dance to such jazz music as can be heard nowhere else; and they get an exhilaration impossible to duplicate. Some of these seekers after new sensations go beyond the gay night-clubs; they peep in under the more seamy side of things; they nose down into lower strata of life. A visit to Harlem at night—the principal streets never deserted, gay crowds skipping from one place of amusement to another, lines of taxicabs and limousines standing under the sparkling lights of the entrances to the famous night-clubs, the subway kiosks swallowing the disgorging crowds all night long—gives the impression that Harlem never sleeps and that the inhabitants thereof jazz through existence.

In Black thought, however, the Harlem Renaissance is the decade of the "New Negro," characterized by pride and optimistic anticipation. In Northern industries, Black emigrants were earning more money and enjoying a greater freedom than they had known in the agrarian South. Returning Black servicemen, having received abroad a respect which many had never known in their homeland, were demanding the right to maintain that newfound dignity. In New York City these masses moved into Harlem, which had been opened to Black residents during the first decade of the twentieth century. There they promenaded with the affluent, who had already established their "Strivers Row." They were joined by entertainers (and hustlers and confidence men) moving as usual to where the money seemed to be. They were joined by talented young Blacks who, hearing that something important and exciting was happening, streamed into Harlem to see for themselves. Artists, entertainers, the affluent, the educated, the working classes, the professional classes mingled bodies and ideas in a microcosm of Black America. Despite the cold that seared the newcomers from the South, despite the economic difficulties that compelled "rent parties," despite awareness that neither the North nor Harlem was that Celestial City dreamed of, Afro-Americans, "facing the rising sun of our new day begun," sang "a song full of the hope that the present has taught us." Harlem was the symbol, but Black America knew that the decade was a Renaissance of New Negroes throughout America.

The "New Negro" sentiment was not a mere accident of the times. In part it was meticulously designed and promoted by Afro-American scholars. Since the early years of the twentieth century, such historians as W. E. B. DuBois and Carter G. Woodson had sought to encourage pride by researching Black history in the United States and in Africa to refute the allegations that the African race had bred only slaves and savages incapable of contributing to civilization. In 1915 Woodson founded the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History to encourage scholarly research, and in 1916 he

established the *Journal of Negro History* as an organ to disseminate the results of the research. Literary scholar Benjamin Brawley recounted the cultural achievements of Afro-American writers and musicians in *The Negro in Art and Literature* (1910). Even Toomer himself proposed such encouragement, as he explained in a letter to Sherwood Anderson a few months before *Cane* was published:

> I feel that in time, in its social phase, my art will aid in giving the Negro to himself. In this connection, I have thought of a magazine. A magazine, American, but concentrating on the significant contributions, or possible contributions of the Negro to the western world. A magazine that would consciously hoist, and perhaps at first a trifle over emphasize a negroid ideal. A magazine that would function organically for what I feel to be the budding of the Negro's consciousness. The need is great. People within the race cannot see it. In fact, they are likely to prove to be directly hostile. But with the youth of the race, unguided or misguided as they now are, there is a tragic need. Talent dissipates itself for want of creative channels of expression, and encouragement.

Assistance came also from such associations as The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and The National Urban League, which committed their energies to improving political, economic, and social conditions for Blacks. Even while it advocated emigration to Africa, Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association strengthened the psychology and the racial pride of Black Americans by emphasizing Africa's identity as a land of Black people and by inspiring Black Americans to develop independent institutions.

Special encouragement was given to the group which W. E. B. Dubois identified as "The Talented Tenth," that educated and talented part of the Afro-American population (or any population) capable of leadership and cultural creativity. Believing that a nation or a race commands respect among the peoples of the world according to its cultural achievements, W. E. B. DuBois used the pages of *The Crisis*, official organ of the NAACP, to stimulate and to provide a showcase for Black educators and writers. Like *The Crisis*, the Urban League's *Opportunity: a Journal of Negro Life* sponsored contests to encourage and publicize Black writers.

Black artists responded enthusiastically to opportunities offered by such periodicals and by white patrons and publishers. An impressive list of new writers of the twenties includes some of the best-remembered, most respected in the annals of Afro-American literature: Jessie Fauset, Langston Hughes, Countée Cullen, Wallace Thurman, Arna Bontemps, Rudolph Fisher, Zora Neale Hurston, Sterling Brown. Reared in diverse regional cultures of the East, the South, and the West, they formed in Harlem the first significant large Black literary community capable of interchanging ideas reflecting the whole of Black America. These Renaissance writers, as Sterling Brown has explained in *Negro Poetry and Drama* (1937), examined new themes: (1) Africa as a source for race pride, (2) Black heroes and heroic episodes from American history, (3) propaganda of protest, (4) a treatment of Afro-American masses, frequently the folk, with more understanding and less

apology, and (5) franker and deeper self-revelation.

If it were no more than an outstanding work of this era, *Cane* would deserve honor. What gives *Cane* even greater significance is that it was one of the first rays of the dawn of that age. When *Cane* was published, Louis Armstrong had been performing with King Oliver's orchestra for only a year, and Duke Ellington was forming his first band. Black musicals had returned to Broadway after more than a decade's absence, but only one or two had appeared. Of the materials now known as the literature of the Renaissance, only one book had been published—Claude McKay's volume of poetry, *Harlem Shadows* (1922). Few white artists of the decade had discovered Black materials. Jazz had not yet attained the national respectability it enjoyed after Paul Whiteman's orchestra featured it in 1924. Among writers of the twenties, only Eugene O'Neill had created a Black protagonist; the "Black" works of Heyward, Anderson, Green, Faulkner, and the rest were still in the future.

No one can fully determine how much *Cane* inspired other Blacks to hope that they too might publish books, or how vividly it suggested to whites the value of Black subject matter. Evidence, however, points to probable influences. Langston Hughes has recalled that the Renaissance writers studied the book assiduously. It affected Sherwood Anderson, who, three years before *Dark Laughter*, voiced his admiration in a letter to Toomer:

> I wanted so much to find and express something clear and beautiful I felt coming up out of your race but in the end gave up. . . . And then McClure handed me the few things of yours I saw and there was the thing I had dreamed of beginning.

Waldo Frank also had read Toomer's materials before he completed his own *Holiday* (1923), a more melodramatic presentation of racial conflicts in the South. No matter how he influenced others, it cannot be denied that Jean Toomer was the first writer of the twenties to delineate Southern Black peasant life perceptively.

To study Toomer's work only in relationship to the New Negro Renaissance, however, is to misjudge its value in the total culture of the twenties. Beneath a superficial gaiety, a stream of conservatism and sobriety flowed through the schizophrenic decade. A conservative, even reactionary force voted for Prohibition and closed down Storyville; promoted riots against Black soldiers who, having fought for democracy abroad, expected to participate in it at home; spread the Ku Klux Klan farther North than ever before and elected a Klansman governor of Indiana. Beneath the superficial gaiety, readers now discern the murmurs of doubt, disillusionment, and insecurity permeating Ernest Hemingway's stories of athletes and expatriates, Sinclair Lewis's ridicule of petty provinciality, the Grotesques cameoed by Edgar Lee Masters and Sherwood Anderson, O'Neill's adumbrations of alienation, the questioning of American values in *What Price Glory?* and *Beggar on Horseback*, and Faulkner's tormented Southerners.

Like these writers Toomer questioned the harmonies and values of his society. *Cane* is no conventional world of Black primitives or exotics. It is a

montage: of women "ripened too soon" ("Karintha"), impotized by the moral prescriptions of bourgeois society ("Box Seat"), transfixed into virgins and virgin-mothers by men who do not understand them ("Fern" and "Kabnis"), neuroticized by the tensions between their subconscious physical urges and their conscious conformity to society's strictures against even the possibility of such emotions ("Esther")—women who wail futilely against their society, "Doesnt it make you mad?" *Cane* is a world of men traumatized and destroyed by bigotry ("Becky" and "Blood-Burning Moon"), men bent double by materialism ("Rhobert"), dreamers who cannot rouse themselves to action ("Theater," "Box Seat," "Avey"), men who rationalize their physical desires into idealized abstractions ("Theater," "Bona and Paul"), men who cower in drink and sex to hide their fears ("Kabnis"), men who cannot offer help beyond that of material goods ("Fern"). *Cane* is a society that requires women to be nonphysical ("Carma"), that deludes itself rather than see that people act according to the laws of God as well as those of society ("Becky"), that pretends that innocence has age limits ("Karintha"). In *Cane*, Toomer foreshadowed much of the questioning and criticism of the twenties.

Stylistically too Toomer rode in the vanguard of his generation. His poetry and prose depend upon the clean, impressionistic phrasings of the Imagists. In a decade when American dramatists conspicuously rebelled against the limitations of traditional drama and its stage, he pioneered experiments with dramatic form, in the novelette-drama "Kabnis"; with symbolic uses of dance, language, and characterization, in "Natalie Mann" [1922], an unpublished drama; and with Expressionism, in "The Sacred Factory" [1927], another unpublished drama.

The form of *Cane* has puzzled readers. Some have identified it as a novel —perhaps because it has a thematic and structural unity, or because it faintly resembles Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), or because a few literary critics—for reasons of their own—have labeled it a novel, or merely because they have not known what else to call it. No matter what name is given to the book's form, however, Jean Toomer did not conceive *Cane* as a novel. As has been indicated earlier by his letter to Frank, Toomer wanted to publish a volume consisting of "Kabnis" and the stories and poems that are now the first section. When prospective publishers complained that the proposed book was too brief, he added the materials that constitute the second section. Furthermore, a few years later when he sought to satisfy his publisher's request for a novel, he structured a very conventional form in such unpublished novels as "The Gallonwerps" [1927], "Transatlantic" [1929], and "Caromb" [1932].

Except in an effort to understand Toomer's intentions and to perceive his art clearly, the name given to the form of *Cane* probably does not matter. Obviously, the work has a three-part structure: The first section, set in the South (Georgia), focuses on stories about women, particularly women whose behavior or thought contrasts with the expectations and demands of society. The second section, introduced by a lyric description of the major artery of Washington, D.C.'s Black settlement and by a sketch of a property-

burdened man, presents men and women in Washington and Chicago whose interrelationships are distorted and disrupted by their conditioning. The third section returns to the South for a grim presentation of a Northern-reared, educated Afro-American who discerns the impotence of the institutionalized education and religion conventionally offered to Blacks, resists the assistance of a messianic figure, derives no meaningful message from his slave heritage, and finds only the anodynes of sex and drink in his journey underground, a Walpurgis-Night experience from which he gathers no truths, only dead coals, which he carries along as he begins his apprenticeship in wagon-making, a trade dying in the new era of the automobile.

Certainly too *Cane* has thematic unity, as might be expected in a series of writings constituting one artist's vision during a single year. Poems link, separate, echo, and introduce the stories with themes of nature's beauty, man's disruption of nature's harmony, work, tributes to Black folksong, love, dreams of escape, false gods and true gods, man's hunger, white woman described through the imagery of the lynching performed in her name, and man's inability and need to harmonize soul, body, and mind. Imagistic, impressionistic, sometimes surrealistic, the poems are redolent with images of nature, Africa, and sensuous appeals to eye and ear.

The sketches and stories—ambiguous, illusive, suggestive—are as rich in imagery as the poems themselves. Visions of pine needles, November cotton flowers, smoke, sugarcane, dusk, flame, and a vari-colored, vari-shaped sun adorn the Southern landscape. The Northern world is pictured as a harsher reality of asphalt streets, alleys, dead or metallic houses, and stone pavements —except when dreams transform the asphalt world into a vision of chestnuts and old leaves and canefields. As the arcs indicate at the beginnings of sections two and three, neither world can form the perfect harmony symbolized by a circle.

As Jean Toomer conceived it, *Cane* was primarily a song for an era that was ending. In an autobiography he described his impressions of Sparta, Georgia:

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