

Jean Toomer's *Cane*: The Harlem Renaissance, Modernism, and the Avant-Garde

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Abstract

This article examines Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923) as an experimental miscellany written at the intersection of the Harlem Renaissance literary flowering and Anglo-American modernist traditions. This revolutionary work, we intend to argue, is thus subversive of genre classifications and canonical labels. We contend that *Cane* is both more modernist than has been thought and more "Negro" than has been claimed. We intend to complicate the position of such a text and articulate its "modernist" contradictions and ambivalences, using for argument major debates about the nature and value of black art at the time. Moreover, we highlight the text's avant-garde, high modernist nature (its structural complexity for its times) and its treatment of modernist yet racialized themes like primitivism and inter-racial sexuality. We conclude that *Cane* is a subversive text that springs from and yet negotiates the American modernism of its times by reshaping and redefining it from a minoritarian African-American position. After all, influence relations between American forms of modernism and English and European ones were strongly present. It is legitimate, therefore, to read *Cane* from the global lens of transnational modernism.

Keywords: Toomer; *Cane*; Harlem Renaissance; Modernism; Avant-Garde; Criticism; Interpretation; African-American Literature and Theory

I. Introduction: *Cane* in African-American Letters and American Modernism

Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923) is a revolutionary text. When it came out, it was viewed as a groundbreaking form of art. W. E. B. Du Bois, in a 1924 review, was right to see it as an epoch marking book (40), praise its unconventional treatment of its subject matter, and even complain about its difficulty. Its "modernism" is related to the basic meaning of the term as a challenge to tradition (Victorian viewpoints and art) and a radicalism in both form and content. *Cane* has an experimental three-part structure, consisting of a miscellany of prose sketches, poems, and a dramatic piece or novella, all detailing the richness and complexity of the African American experience in the rural South and the urban North. However, this experimental, avant-garde form that defies narrative continuity and generic conventions is enhanced by thematic relations to canonical modernist works like the creation of subjective moods and the use of psychological realism, primitive themes, and explicit sexuality. The result is a subtle textual *mélange* that does not lose its racial imprint. Toomer mastered modernist themes and techniques, but he employed them to produce powerful racial art that does not sacrifice artistry. As Alain Locke once put it, "The new motive ... in being racial is to be so purely for the sake of art" ("*Negro Youth*" 222). Unlike many Harlem Renaissance texts, *Cane* is not an overtly propagandistic text, but this does not deprive it of a Harlem Renaissance label. African-American writers during the first half of the 20th century, as it is still the case now, were not writing in a vacuum. They were open to American, English, and European influences in the arts, and Toomer was no exception. They were capable of writing modernist works conforming to a transnational modernism. *Cane* is not exactly a novel. Its hybrid nature makes it resist easy categorization and stay at the borderline between fiction and poetry, between realism and lyricism.

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The "New Negro" movement as ushering newness was the right category for such writing, but American modernism is also a valid category for this new kind of art, especially when Toomer, as Rudolph Byrd argues, had a difficult relation with other Harlem Renaissance writers and does not easily fit Locke's grouping of his stories and poems with Eric Walrond and Langston Hughes among other famous figures in the movement (212-213). In the anthology he edited, considered by many as the Harlem Renaissance manifesto and entitled after the movement *The New Negro* (1925), Locke included Toomer's stories "Carma" and "Fern" as well as the poems "Georgia Dusk" and "Song of the Son," all from *Cane*. Locke saw in Toomer a writer who unproblematically belonged to "New Negro" movement, an alternative name for the Harlem Renaissance. In a 1925 piece entitled "Negro Youth Speaks," Locke claims that Toomer is a new Negro voice in the short story and poetry genres and lists him with members of "a new generation" like Walrond, Rudolph Fisher, Hughes, and Countee Cullen (221). This new generation of African-American writers can be seen in terms of a break with established traditions, i.e. in terms of modernist perspectives in art and literature. In fact, newness is thus the essence of the Harlem Renaissance literary outpourings, which covered new styles and themes in new forms of expression or typical themes but in new forms of representation.

By contrast, Byrd contends that Toomer does not belong to the Harlem Renaissance in Locke's conception of it and concludes that "it is in many ways a historical accident that Toomer is grouped with the writers of the Renaissance at all" (217). Byrd groups Toomer with American writers like Sherwood Anderson and Hart Crane. On the other hand, Locke argues the conformity of the new generation of Negro writers, with whom he listed Toomer, to "contemporary artistic thought, mood, and style" and adds that they are "thoroughly modern, some of them ultra-modern, and Negro thoughts now wear the uniform of the age" ("Negro Youth" 221). *Cane*, we should remember, coexisted with American modernism, with the Jazz Age and roaring twenties, and was in line with the "make it new" dictum of modernists like T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, H. D., and James Joyce and away from black writers within the Harlem Renaissance who were writing within conventional realism like Du Bois and Claude McKay. Nevertheless, *Cane*, we argue later, was praised and received by many Harlem Renaissance figures, other than Locke, as an example of a racial art that was deemed essential for such a renaissance. The structural complexity of the text makes it in line with the mainstream American modernism of William Faulkner while its racial imprint and celebration of black life make it in the black traditions of Arna Bontemps, Langston Hughes, and other writers associated with the Harlem Renaissance movement. In this article, we intend to complicate the position of such a text and articulate its "modernist" contradictions and ambivalences. Moreover, we highlight its avant-garde, high modernist nature (its structural complexity for its times) and its treatment of the modernist and yet racialized themes of primitivism and interracial sexuality. We seek to complicate existing trends in the critical scholarship on the novel rather than offer solutions or definite statements. It is our contention, though, that any exclusive logic we use to claim the text to American modernism or the Harlem Renaissance is essentially flawed. Conforming to the essential meaning of modernism, Toomer's work breaks away with tradition and established rules for style/form to focus on impressions and subjective moods.

However, claims that we simply include the Harlem Renaissance works within American modernism risk ignoring the peculiarities of the experiences of blacks in America like slavery, lynching, and folk-songs. Just as Locke in his anthology *The New Negro* highlights the national aspect of the Harlem Renaissance as an American movement beyond racial restrictions, racial consciousness was paradoxically the driving force for much of these literary productions. Significantly, we contend that *Cane* is both more modernist than has been thought and more "Negro" than has been claimed. Considering Toomer's mixed racial background and light-skinned complexion, *Cane* acquires for us the status of a "minor literature," which Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari define in a study on Franz Kafka in the following way: "A minor literature does not come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language" (16). This politicized literature writes back to the canon, challenges it, and helps shape a national consciousness. *Cane* is a subversive text that springs from and yet negotiates/revises American modernism by reshaping and redefining it from a minoritarian position and during the same inter-war period of canonical modernism. The ambivalence of the text is characteristically modernist.

To complicate *Cane's* relationship to American modernism and the Harlem Renaissance, we like to examine two standard but key theoretical pieces often mentioned in the Harlem Renaissance literary theory, namely George Schuyler's 1926 article in the *Nation* "The Negro-Art Hokum" (with its assimilationist denial of Negro art or differences between black artists and their white peers) as opposed to Langston Hughes's response to it in the consecutive issue "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" in which he asserts the uniqueness of Negro art and blames racism for the assimilationist stance writers take. Schuyler noted that the differences between black and white Americans were being erased by European influences and that there was no Negro art as such. He writes: "As for the literature, painting and sculpture of Aframericans—such as there is—it is identical in kind with the literature, painting, and sculpture of white Americans: that is, it shows more or less evidence of European influence" (37). Schuyler asserts nationality as Americans over race affiliations and argues that the Aframerican "is merely a lamp blacked Anglo-Saxon" (37) and to put aside his color is "just plain American" (37). Since such writers share similar socioeconomic and political circumstances, Schuyler asks: "How, then, can the black American be expected to produce art and literature dissimilar to that of the white American?" (38).² Schuyler thus ignores the racial experiences of oppression, slavery, discrimination and the rich culture woven around them. By Schuyler's standards, *Cane* is an example of plain American literature because it cannot be distinguished from the melting pot that is American culture, or even a wider global culture. The same stand is taken by the modernist writer promoted alongside the Harlem Renaissance Waldo Frank who, in his foreword to *Cane*, presents the book as "the south" and writes: "a poet has arisen among our American youth who has known how to turn the essences and materials of his Southland into the essences and materials of literature" (vii). Frank, in a similar vein, claims that Toomer "writes as a poet" concerned with beauty and not as Negro poet (vii). Frank concludes that the South "is not a problem to be solved; it is a field of loveliness to be sung" (viii-ix). To follow these arguments is to see *Cane* as an instance of American modernism and to belittle the Harlem Renaissance as a movement. However, the "apparent" absence of race propaganda does not necessarily make *Cane* simply American rather than African-American.

On the other hand, Langston Hughes, in "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" published in 1926 in response to Schuyler's essay, takes a different stand to celebrate *Cane* as an example of a racial art at the heart of the Harlem Renaissance movement. Hughes celebrates the common people at the basis of a racial art, "the low-down folks" and folk traditions (jazz, blues, spirituals, the vernacular, folk music, and dances) against American values of standardization. The vitality of uninhibited life among lower-class people that Hughes highlights is in line with *Cane's* (modernist) theme of primitivism and its confident portrayal of such common characters. In fact, racial art for Hughes emerges from these facets of primitivism that assert African roots and folk culture. The low down folks for Hughes were the source of a true Negro art that overcomes the effects of racism, "the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization."

The racial artist, Hughes contends, "works against an undertow of sharp criticism and misunderstanding from his own group and unintentional bribes from the whites." Blacks want him to be respectable and whites want him to be stereotyped. At an interesting moment in this essay, Hughes writes: "Both would have told Jean Toomer not to write *Cane*. The colored people did not praise it. The white people did not buy it. Most of the colored people who did read *Cane* hate it. They are afraid of it. Although the critics gave it good reviews the public remained indifferent. Yet (excepting the work of Du Bois) *Cane* contains the finest prose written by a Negro in America. And like the singing of Robeson, it is truly racial." *Cane* is an instance of racial art for Hughes because it captures Negro life in the South, in Georgia, with its sweetness and bitterness, because Toomer freely writes about black women, interracial sex, and violence. This is very true of Southern life because it is a variation on the lives of middle-class people. Hughes's own poems, like *Cane*, were racial in theme and about common life and the beauty of "Negro" life. Hughes concludes: "We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame." Hughes claims Toomer as a young "Negro" artist and thus sees him as contributing to what is known to us as the Harlem Renaissance. Moreover, DuBois, despite coming from a different stance, writes in a review of *Cane* dated 1924 and entitled "The Younger Literary Movement" for *The Crisis*: "And Jean Toomer is the first of our writers to hurl his pen across the very face of our sex conventionality" (41). He complains about the difficulty of the text (42), but he claims Toomer as a modernist Negro artist rather than an American artist.

² In an article in Locke's *The New Negro* entitled "The Negro's Americanism," pp. 353-360, Melville J. Herskovits argues similar points about the "acculturation" of the Negro to American standards and the humanism of his art.

Using the text itself, we seek to show that *Cane* is legitimately, but not unproblematically, both American and “Negro” modernist literature to a higher extent than commonly believed and that to align it with either side is not to give the text the justice it deserves. *Cane* wavers between modernist and racial themes. It is a hybrid text in that it tackles modernist and African-American themes within a structurally complex, experimental, and avant-garde frame. Toomer, significantly and successfully, made racial themes the subject matter for modernist art.

II. Toomer’s Modernist Heritage and the Hybridity of *Cane*

Toomer’s racial background might justify the hybridity of *Cane* as a text and its existence at the borderline between the Harlem Renaissance and American modernism. Despite being a mixed race, Toomer considered himself simply American, neither white nor black. In a letter to Waldo Frank, Toomer wrote that to try to pin him to one of his parts is to lose him (North 165). He followed the need for artistic expression. The fair skin color of the author (who never lived in Harlem) and his racially mixed identity (colored maternal grandfather) add to the ambivalence of his racial identity as a man who considered himself merely American (after the publication of *Cane*)³ and dissociated himself from the constrictions of race for the sake of a humanity that transcends race. Toomer repudiated his African ancestry and disliked referring to his book as a “Negro” book. Partially against our argument, he seemed to reject, in a sense, attempts to “racialize” his book. He wrote once to James Weldon Johnson (in a letter dated 1930) after the publication of *Cane*: “My poems are not Negro poems, nor are they Anglo-Saxon or white or English poems” (qtd. in Helbling 130). He directly rejects the writer’s racial identity as a determining factor for the value and reception of literature. This is why the text is marked by a brand of political liberalism away from direct protest messages or propaganda themes. Both writer and text defy easy labels and genre and race distinctions. The writer records his discovery of his southern roots, and African American life is the subject matter of *Cane*. Therefore, we cannot simply take at face-value that Toomer’s poems are neither African-American nor Anglo-Saxon. It is not Toomer’s intention that determines the nature of his texts. In fact, his attempt to escape from such labels might indicate being trapped by such poles and writing within them as thematic and structural borders. After all, it is the reader who can detect *Cane*’s affinities with Harlem Renaissance works or its deviation from such works. And why should we think, following Toomer, that writing racial art might go against the aims of universalism and humanism Toomer sought or simply the aims of nationalism? In the next section, we shed more light on possible affinities between both traditions Toomer seemed to defy but could not actually ignore.

In his well-known anthology, Locke optimistically speaks in *The New Negro* of “a new psychology” and a “new spirit” in the black masses (3). He adds: “The racialism of the Negro is no limitation or reservation with respect to American life; it is only a constructive effort to build the obstructions in the stream of his progress into an efficient dam of social energy and power” (12). Locke sees a contribution to American modernism and national art in these young writers. This is the Negro’s initiation into American society and his contributions to such a society artistically and culturally. Locke, thus, saw the contributions of Harlem Renaissance writers as part of the American modernist canon. Locke seems to write in line with the US poet and critic Ezra Pound’s famous modernist slogan of making art “new” promulgated in the 1920s. Pound, one of the proponents of imagism and myth in literature, was one of the strongest voices of modernism in literature. The modernist nature of *Cane* can be understood as the newness implied by a break with established literary traditions.

The relationship between the two traditions—American modernism and African American modernism—is not exactly new. For example, Adrienne Gosselin argues that the distinction between such movements, “real or not, arises because American literary history views Modernism as largely a European movement contemporaneous with, but separate from, the Harlem Renaissance.

³ Toomer once wrote in *Time* in 1932: “As I see America, it is like a great stomach, into which are thrown the elements that make up the life blood. From this source is coming a distinct race of people. They will achieve tremendous works of art, literature and music. They will not be white, black or yellow—just Americans” (qtd. in Caldeira 544). He also saw himself as an American who was “neither black nor white” (qtd. in Byrd 214). Responding to some editors in 1922 asking for biographical materials, Toomer said: “I have lived equally amid the two race groups. Now white, now colored. From my own point of view I am naturally and inevitably an American. I have striven for a spiritual fusion analogous to the fact of racial intermingling” (qtd. in Bontemps 21).

And while American Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance both share such primary modernist concerns as alienation, primitivism, and experimental form, the canon of American literature continues to record black writers of the period as 'Harlem Renaissance' writers rather than black Modernist or simply American Modernist writers" (37). On the other hand, Houston Baker, Jr., defines the Harlem Renaissance as "an outpouring of Afro-American writing, music, and social criticism that includes some of the earliest attempts by Afro-American artists and intellectuals to define themselves in 'modern' terms" (89). He sees the mark of Afro-American modernism in what he calls "mastery of form" and "deformation of mastery" (93). Washington and Du Bois, he argues, are representative cases of this modernist discursive practice. Washington mastered the minstrel form and Du Bois deformed that mastery through the spirituals (93-4). Is it the case that Toomer mastered the techniques of racial art and tried to transcend them in modernist forms? Or is it the case that he was doing the opposite? In other words, was he "deforming" his mastery of racial art or modernist writing to serve racial ends? We tackle such issues in the next section in the course of our treatment of the selections that make up *Cane*. In both traditions, American modernism and African American modernism, we find instances of impressionism (as subjective re-creation of reality and a focus on inner states) and expressionism (as subjective expression of emotion/sad moods and a focus on color/sound imagery and effects). Modernist writing is symbolist lyrical writing ignoring mimetic conventions for the sake of effects, diffused with the sounds of spirituals, blues, and jazz, and with an elegiac tone sometimes. The rhythmical patterns of such writing are modernist just as self-referentiality is. Moreover, modernists focus on language and form since language is the carrier of experience. *Cane* manifests such diverse influences. It also manifests debt in style to Sherwood Anderson, especially to his *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), and to Waldo Frank within American modernism. Waldo Frank wrote subjective, lyrical novels with a poet's sense of language. Frank, we should remember, helped Toomer publish *Cane*. In addition, many white writers served as patrons for black friends. Exposure to American modernism in terms of works and prominent figures was apparently there.

As for experimentalism, it can be defined as the artistic innovation characteristic of modernist writing. The experimental style breaks narrative continuity. The avant-garde artist revolts against tradition and undertakes what Pound calls "make it new." Innovation/radical experimentation in style and form and even subject matter challenges norms. In African-American literature, this emphasis on the aesthetic dimensions of the work does not necessarily sacrifice the beauty of "Negro" life with both its sweet and harsh realities. No explicit race propaganda might be involved in such writing, but racial art themes are still there in the creation of subjective moods and atmosphere characteristic of life in the segregated South; in this light, the avant-garde is the self-consciously new exalting of the exotic, the sensual rural aspects of African American life. In terms of themes, modernists began to see virtue in simple life after the massive killings of World War I and the abuses of industrialism. In this regard, we find that the beauty of African American folk culture and the impact of industrialization on this vernacular southern culture dominate the text of *Cane*. As a reaction, primitivism emerges as a focus on the damage done to African American rural and simple life by the industrialized, urban North. This gets manifested as belief in spontaneity, exoticism, wholeness, natural/instinctual life and rejection of the artificial. Alternatively, primitivism appears as revering the past from which modern man has fallen into decay or a privileging of the body over the mind. Many modernists were hostile toward mass culture and the increasing industrialization. European and American artists were interested in the exotic/the irrational and the ramifications of Freudian psychology on the subconscious and primal impulses (along with Darwinian and Bergson's ideas). This included an interest in African masks in art and sculpture. Sherwood Anderson documents in his works the transition in America from rural life to industrialization and the alienation and sterility related to that. Judging from this, we can conclude that influence relations between American modernism and African American modernism were mutual with reciprocated styles and themes.

III. Reading *Cane*

Cane was inspired by a trip Toomer made to Georgia in which he became familiar with the harmony of landscape, heard folk songs and spirituals, a culture untouched by white influences, by mechanical urban life. This trip helped him come to terms with part of his own black identity and blood. The text has a circular structure, beginning with the South, moving to the north, and returning to the south. It also shifts, as Toomer once said, from simple forms to complex ones and then back to simple forms (North 167). The first part highlights dusk and setting suns, and the last part ends when the sun "arises from its cradle in the tree-tops of the forest" and is a "Gold-glowing child" sending "a birth-song" (239). In a letter to Waldo Frank during the writing of *Cane*, Toomer wrote: "From three angles, *Cane's* design is a circle. Aesthetically, from simple forms to complex ones, and back to simple forms. Regionally from South up to North, and back into the South again."

Or, from the North down into the South, and then a return North. From the point of view of the spiritual entity behind the work, the curve really starts with 'Bona and Paul' (awakening), plunges into 'Kabnis,' emerges in 'Karintha,' etc., swings upward into 'Theatre' and 'Box Seat' and ends (pauses) in 'Harvest Song.'" (qtd. in Benson 82). The first part has one arc, the second a more intensified, clearer arc, and the third two opposing arcs almost forming a circle. Hence, this is a fluid, open-ended, and modernist text. The prefatory arcs do not form a complete circle, probably because of the conflictual nature of text and the split allegiances of the characters. For example, the character Ralph Kabnis in one piece has to reconcile two parts of himself, two identities white and black, before he is redeemed and successful. The structure of the book is also a mythic structure if myth is considered as the organizational pattern imposed on the fragments and based on the journey motif to the South, North, and back to South. This quest theme is like that in Joyce's 1922 *Ulysses*. And this mythic quest/journey structure is what formally "sustains the great variety and experimentation of Toomer's work" (Caldeira 545). So, and despite its apparently fragmented nature, *Cane* employs a structure and a pattern by way of imposing a sense of order on this chaos of modern experiences the text tackles. At one level, *Cane* is modernist by virtue of its themes. In one dramatic piece, Kabnis is a hesitant (anti)hero reminiscent of a character T. S. Eliot once produced. In his alienation from his roots, and with his "thin hair" (158), awkwardness, failures, fears and anxieties, he is another modernist Eliotic Prufrock. In his restlessness and hesitation—covering his head under bed covers (159) and fear of lynching ghosts—he is also another Joycean young and sensitive artist since he is a poet in the making. He is haunted by a negative sense of racial victimization that he cannot transcend. He is fixated on the past of suffering and lynching. "I swear I feel their fingers," he once intimates (165). He has no grandeur just like Eliot's Prufrock who claims he is no Hamlet. Two men, Layman and Halsey, tease him with stories about lynching, and he is fearful. He stumbles on a rope (181), which augments his fears. In this sense, he, as one critic says, "has much in common with modern man" (Caldeira 548). He "lives, or rather destroys himself, in the midst of the crisis of the word—which is the crisis of modernity" (Caldeira 548). His "intellectualized worldview and language prevent his communication with his black brothers, and his refinement makes him insensitive to and contemptuous of the language of his community" (Caldeira 548). Kabnis is educated, sensitive, emotional yet weak and fearful. His alienation, restlessness, failures, and search for identity make him a modern man. We find in Kabnis the anti-hero the crises that bothered modern man, social, political, and historical. He embodies the modernist zeitgeist, this worldview that effected anti-heroism (Neimneh "The Anti-Hero"). His melancholic, pensive nature is typically modernist. So, he is relevant to African-American themes and simultaneously American modernist ones.

"Kabnis" the play is another *Waiting for Godot* in that not much happens. The work is a depiction of futility and frustration. In "Kabnis" we return to the south, Georgia where Kabnis searches for his racial identity and listens to night winds. These are "vagrant poets, whispering" (157). These winds, like poets, sing: "White-man's land. / Niggers, sing./ Burn, bear black children/ Till poor rivers bring/Rest, and sweet glory/ In Camp Ground." (157). He is haunted by the hostility of the South, by slave-fields (159), yet tortured by the beauty of the southern setting (the moon, the hills, and the fields) reeking of folk-songs (161). The South carries a heavy heritage of discrimination and bloody violence. "Hell of a mess I've got in: even the poultry is hostile" (159). He, a mixed-blood man from the North but with southern roots, fears ghosts and noises in a still place "where they burn and hang men" (164). He is sensitive, fearful, with an artistic temperament as a teacher. He is struck by the beauty of Georgia nights, by the folk-songs pervading hills and valleys (161). Throughout the text, we never fail to see Kabnis as the mixed-blood and modern man simultaneously, the human individual with a rich historical legacy. The piece smells of the South and recreates it. It is an impressionistic, expressionistic piece depicting the inner state of mind of its title character and creating, in the process, a depressive mood pervading the piece.

The early pieces and vignettes are dispersed by verse refrains that make them ritualistic songs. They are narrated by a poet who comes back to the land of his ancestors to reconnect with his slave roots. "Karintha" is likened in these refrains to dusk during the setting sun. The narrative also repeats the refrain and its key words. In a songful environment, someone produces a song about the smoke: "Smoke is on the hills. Rise up./Smoke is on the hills, O Rise/And take my soul to Jesus" (4). The indifference to violence, physical and emotional in "Karintha" is echoed in the next piece, a poem entitled "Reapers" in which black reapers pay no attention to a bleeding field rat and continue to cut with their scythes.

They sharpen their tools and work with their hands. It is a weed-cutting machine, a 'mower' driven by horses (6) that cuts the rat and goes on cutting. As with other pieces, the atmosphere here is suggestive of a harsh yet thrilling life in the South, a life that is beautiful yet oppressive. Sexually exploited in a Georgia rural setting, Karintha is beauty ripened before it matures. Men use her body, bring her money but fail to appreciate her soul. "Men do not know that the soul of her was a growing thing ripened too soon" (4). As a child, Karintha is "a wild flash that told the other folks just what it was to live" (1).

She fights with other children, stones the cows and beats her dog (2). In an environment where men mate with women as soon as they are of age and in a small house where she sees or hears her parents making love, she imitates. The result is primitive violence against the illegitimate child she carries and leaves to smoulder among the pine-needles: "A child fell out of her womb onto a bed of pine-needles in the forest" (4). Karintha is described as "a November cotton flower" (2), and the third piece, a poem, is entitled "November Cotton Flower." Both are thematically related in having a beauty sudden and unexpected for its time or surroundings. The elegiac poems reiterate themes of pain, sorrow, evening suns/dusk, slavery, lynching, and death—all of which are examined in the stories as well. This black woman faces the double oppressions of patriarchy and societal prejudice. We sympathize with her victimized status as well. The poems are thematic links within the prose pieces, enhancing the lyrical nature of this modernist text. "Portrait in Georgia" mythically alludes to lynching in its description of a Georgia woman; her hair is "coiled like a lyncher's rope" and her body is "white as the ash of black flesh after flame" (50). In fact, the description of this Georgia woman is itself suggestive of a classical gorgon or a Medusa figure. Like "Karintha", "Carma" has poetic refrains about cane and corn fields serving like the chorus in a Greek tragedy. Carma is a strong and intuitive rural woman in Georgia who rides a mule-driven wagon (16). As an instinctive woman, she sexually deceives her absent husband who is in the gang because of her. "No one blames her for that" (18). Enraged, he slashes another man. She is a vital woman with unrestrained sexuality. Her closeness to earth and primitive sexuality can be examined in the light of D. H. Lawrence's primitive characters who follow the sexual impulse and privilege the intuitive over the overtly rational part of their lives. "Becky" is a white woman who has two Negro sons. Her life testifies to the existence of miscegenation despite racial tension. In this story, sexual violence is reversed across racial lines.

Since the text employs modernist impressionism and expressionism, melancholy is a dominant emotion in *Cane*. The text employs elegiac pastoralism to express a lost past that has beauty despite its pain. Between and within the prose pieces, folk songs and spirituals serve as thematic links and as a reminder of the racial nature of this text. These enhance the impressionistic force of the pieces. The realism used to describe racial violence in "Blood-Burning Moon" is tempered with the folk song that gives the story its title and the ritualistic terms of description that make violence inevitable yet give it symbolic mythical aspects. The story "Blood-Burning Moon" depicts a lynching and follows the folk belief that the full moon in the doorway is a bad omen. Here the folk-song repeated three times is about "Red nigger moon. Sinner! Blood-burning moon. Sinner! Come out that fact'ry door." This functions like the choral segments in a Greek tragedy, sung by Tom, Louisa, and even "the whole street" (58). The rushed events lead to the violent end. The moon, just like barking dogs and crowing roosters, creates the impression of fateful inter-racial violence. When Tom is burned on the stake, the bitter scene of ritualistic violence is still described in lyrical language: "The mob yelled. The mob was silent. Now Tom could be seen within the flames. Only his head, erect, lean, like a blackened stone. Stench of burning flesh soaked the air. Tom's eyes popped. His head settled downward. The mob yelled. Its yell echoed against the skeleton stone walls and sounded like a hundred yells. Like a hundred mobs yelling. Its yell thudded against the thick front wall and fell back. Ghost of a yell slipped through the flames and out the great door of the factory" (66-67). Tom Burwell works in the fields plowing and picking cotton. He is a man of natural impulses close to the soil, again in the English modernist tradition of the characters of D. H. Lawrence. Bob Stone as a white master wants to possess the primitive woman Louisa while Tom wants to marry her. She accepts sensuality without rebuffing any of the men.

"Theater" exposes not only the sexual restlessness of blacks in northern cities but also dramatic features hinted at in its title (implying that blacks in cities are detached from real, spontaneous life). John and Dorris are not able to connect because of class differences. Black men and women dance and sing jazz songs: "Black-skinned, they dance and shout above the tick and thrill of white-walled buildings" (91). In such white cities, blacks are not living the intuitive and instinctive lives they lead in the South. Their detachment from the soil makes them slaves of material concerns and fake lifestyles. In this regard, *Cane* evokes the atmosphere of the roaring twenties and Jazz Age F. S. Fitzgerald promulgated in the mainstream writings of American modernism.

The liberated lifestyles blacks lived in northern America cities, along with the spread of jazz, ragtime, and ballrooms, constituted the essence of the Jazz Age alluded to in *Cane*. "Face" is an imagistic, impressionistic poem. Bare details describe "hair", "brows", and "eyes." The poem recreates an experience of pain and sorrow. Above all, it describes the modernist theme of fragmentation and loss. Eyes are "mist of tears" and muscles are "grapes of sorrow" ready for death (14). The precise images that fragment the body account for the detached tone of the poem, its imagistic lack of emotions; it begins: "Hair— /silver-grey, / like streams of stars" (14). By contrast, "Song of the Son" is about a return of a son to the land he loves and setting suns. He returns to a "song-lit race of slaves" (21) of his roots. The fragmentation of the former piece is juxtaposed against the wholeness conjured up in this latter piece. "Georgia Dusk" repeats key southern images about cane, pines, corn, setting sun, sawmill. Folk songs here are inseparable from the natural setting. "Fern" is another Georgia woman the men are unable to fathom and seek sexual domination of. "When she was young, a few men took her, but got no joy from it" (25). Yet they feel bound to her (25). She is the product of miscegenation, being born to a Jewish father and a black woman. The northern narrator who came to the soil of his ancestors says: "That the sexes were made to mate is the practice of the South. Particularly, black folks were made to mate" (26). She is linked to the beauty of Georgia dusk and folk-songs. She has a mystical aura. Men bring her their bodies but she gets tired of them (25). These primitive, rural women are at one with the soil and act impulsively and spontaneously away from the restrictions imposed by conventional religion or social mores against miscegenation. They are close to nature and away from the confinements of civilization and sophistication/inhibitions of modern life. They enact the modernist thematic belief in the exotic, the impulsive, and the irrational. Moreover, modern ideas and principles such as the Freudian instinctive Id and Bergson's intuitive *élan vitale*—and which highly influenced modernist literary pieces—seem to be applicable to their lives.

"Seventh Street" begins and ends with a refrain reminiscent of F. Scott Fitzgerald: "Money burns the pocket, pocket hurts,/Bootleggers in silken shirts,/Ballooned, zooming Cadillacs,/Whizzing, whizzing down the street-car tracks" (71 and 72). Seventh Street in Washington is described as "a bastard of Prohibition and the War" (71). Jazz in this section contrasts with the folk songs and spirituality of the South. John in "Theatre" stands for the repression of sensual impulses. "Box Seat" similarly highlights the constrictions imposed by modern, mechanical life. Dan and Muriel suffer the alienation and abortive love of a confined society. Dan is a primitive man from the canefields who goes to a mechanical North lacking spirituality: "I am come to a sick world to heal it" (106). Muriel stirs Dan by an "animalism, still unconquered by zoo-restrictions and keeper-taboos" (112). This vital energy associated with the South is juxtaposed against the sterility and wasteland of modern cities, an idea already consolidated by Eliot's well-known *Waste Land* poem in its critique of London and city life. "Bona and Paul" discusses failures in love. Paul is a southern mulatto in Chicago. He is educated and in love with a white woman. Paul tries to reconnect with his racial roots, with the sun and fertility of Georgia. He and Bona cannot have a love relation because of a gap. He cannot assert his love to her and then accuses her of being cold. The city environment is sterile for love: "They seem to be human distortions spinning tensely in a fog" (137). Paul finds it difficult to express his love to Bona, and she accuses him of being cold in a Chicago setting. "Rhobert" is a materialistic urban man who cares more about private property than a connection with his roots and the soil. He is thus spiritually dead. This waste land motif is another strong modernist idea pursued in the text of *Cane*.

In "Rhobert", the sterility of city life is symbolized by his house, an objective correlative for the spiritual death of city dwellers: "His house is a dead thing that weighs him down" (73). "Calling Jesus" concerns a city woman whose soul who is estranged from her because of the confinement of city life. "Calling Jesus" opens as follows: "Her soul is like a little thrust-tailed dog that follows her, whimpering" (102). This is the confinement of urban life behind thick doors where people are detached from their souls and lead alienated, compartmentalized lives. Such people lack spirituality and wholeness. "Esther" is enchanted by a vagrant preacher Barlo and is disillusioned by him when she discovers his fake preaching against what he does of drinking and womanizing. Barlo is described as a "clean-muscled, magnificent, black-skinned Negro" (36). He is a good cotton picker, a lover of women, a good dice player and fighter. Barlo uses in his sermons refrains from spirituals. The sexual theme in other stories continues: Esther offers herself to him but is disillusioned at his drinking and mixing with other women.

IV. Conclusion

That Toomer joined racial themes with modernist form makes *Cane* transcend the failures sometimes ascribed to the Harlem Renaissance for being racially provincial. The influence of *Cane* and its current reception testify to its high modernist status, a status, we can claim, not much less than that achieved by *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land*. As a phenomenon, the avant-garde was an important element of modernism. Its main tenet was a self-conscious violation of known conventions and an embrace of new styles and forms. This entailed shocking themes and features and sometimes an alienation from established orders. As a modernist text, *Cane* never fails to engage major themes like primitivism, sexuality, recreation of subjective states, and experimental styles. Moreover, and as a racial text, *Cane* never fails to employ and reiterate the richness of black heritage and lifestyles with folk songs, spirituals, slavery, and racial and sexual discrimination acting as constant reminders of its African American roots. The text reveals an awareness of international and European literary models and testifies to the emergence of a symbolistic period in American literature after WWI. *Cane* is a dislocated text, difficult to locate and categorize, but occupying a unique position at the intersection of American modernism and the Harlem Renaissance.

The avant-garde remains one of the most important features of modernism. In one sense, it allowed for the introduction of "neglected, and sometimes forbidden, subject matter" (Abrams 227). Therefore, and in another sense, it aimed to "shock the sensibilities of the conventional reader and to challenge the norms and pieties of the dominant bourgeois culture" (Abrams 227). This text of *Cane* treated not only the themes of primitive sexuality and interracial miscegenation but also high modernism in terms of experimental forms and styles and a break with representational forms of realism for the sake of expressionism and impressionism. The impact of WWI on western literatures and cultures and as manifested in a shaken belief in religion, morality, and traditional ways of seeing the world and the self can be seen in the texture and content of *Cane*. Just as Eliot wrote in a famous review of Joyce's *Ulysses* in 1923 that the mythical approach of Joyce was a way of ordering "the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history", writers like Eliot and Pound reacted to this state of disorder by using fragmented structures to reflect a contemporary state of loss and disintegration. The apparently fragmented parts yet relate to each other via patterns the reader can infer or discover. In *Cane*, the theme of race is what unites the seemingly dislocated fragments comprising the book and what grounds it in the political domain of committed literature.

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