Blood-Burning Moon Study Guide

Blood-Burning Moon by Jean Toomer

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Contents

Introduction

The short story "Blood-Burning Moon" is part of Jean Toomer's book *Cane,* which was first published in 1923. The book is divided into three parts: the first two contain short stories and poetry, while the third part consists of a loosely-structured play that is sometimes considered a short story. All the stories in this first section take place in the rural South, usually with an African-American woman as the focus. For the most part, they take place at dusk and outdoors, often in the cane fields. "Blood-Burning Moon" is the last story in this part and, interestingly, it is the only one that does not have a woman's name as its title.

"Blood-Burning Moon" is exemplary of Toomer's theme of African-American identity and his setting of rural Southern life during segregation. It tells the story of the conflict between Bob Stone, a white man, and Tom Burwell, an African American, who are rivals for the affection of Louisa, a light-skinned African-American woman. During the course of one evening, each man learns of the other's relationship with Louisa. After Bob challenges Tom to a knife fight in front of Louisa, Tom slashes the throat of the white man. Bob is able to stumble back to the white part of town and tell the town folk who knifed him. A mob of white men immediately lynch Tom by tying him to a stake and burning him.

Author Biography

Jean Toomer was born in Washington, D.C., where he spent much of his childhood in an affluent white section of the city. He lived in the home of his maternal grandfather, P. B. S. Pinchback, a prominent black Louisiana politician of the Reconstruction era and a former U. S. Senator. His father, a Georgia planter, left his mother shortly after he was born. Toomer's mother died when he was fifteen. Soon afterwards, the Pinchbacks experienced heavy financial losses, requiring the family to move to a modest African-American neighborhood.

Although his ancestry was racially mixed, Toomer's appearance suggested he was white. His experience living in both black and white society offered him an unusual perspective on racial identity. Writing to his publishers in the summer before *Cane* was published, he commented on his racial heritage: "Racially, I seem to have (who knows for sure) seven blood mixtures: French, Dutch, Welsh, Negro, German, Jewish, and Indian. Because of these, my position in America is a curious one."

After graduating from high school in Washing-ton, D.C., Toomer led a transient existence. He attended several colleges and universities, studying subjects from agriculture to history. He tried his hand at various jobs, including selling cars, teaching physical education, and welding. While living in New York City in 1919 and 1920 he was active in the Greenwich Village literary circle, making the acquaintance of writers such as Edwin Arlington Robinson and Waldo Frank. His life underwent a profound change during the fall of 1921, when he ran a small school in Sparta, Georgia. During those months, Toomer developed a new feeling for his African-American roots, especially through his encounters with poor people who worked in the cotton and cane fields. As he listened to their folk songs and spirituals, he was deeply moved. He returned to the South on a tour with Waldo Frank during 1922. His experiences in the South inspired much of his book *Cane.*

Shortly after the publication of *Cane* in 1923, Toomer became a follower of George Gurdjieff, an Armenian mystic whose philosophy aspired toward the achievement of "objective consciousness": awareness of one's status as part of a larger, universal being. Toomer spent the summer of 1924 at the Gurdjieff Institute in Fontainebleau, France. When he returned to the United States he dedicated himself to spreading Gurdjieff's beliefs. He continued to be involved with Gurdjieff and his movement until 1940, when he renounced Gurdjieff and converted to Quakerism. Although he continued to write during these years, most of his writing concerned his religious beliefs, and little of it was published. Toomer died in 1967, two years before the republication of *Cane* and the subsequent revival of interest in his work.

Plot Summary

The story opens with a description of the full moon rising as the women of the poor, African-American part of town—"factory town"—sing songs against its evil spell. Louisa, a black woman, is walking home from her job as a domestic servant for a white family, the Stones. She, too, sings as she thinks about Bob Stone, the younger son of her employers, with whom she has a clandestine relationship, and about Tom Burwell, a black man who works in the fields and has been showing an interest in her. The thought of the two men cause a "strange stir" within her, and she tries vaguely to determine which of the men is the cause of her agitation. Her song becomes "agitant and restless." Animals sense her agitation, and dogs begin to bark and yowl while chickens cackle and roosters crow. Louisa finally arrives home and sits down on the front step. The moon moves towards a "thick cloud-bank which soon would hide it." This section ends with the refrain of a song that is the source of the story's title and will be repeated twice more:

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

At the edge of the forest outside the factory town, a group of African-American men, including Tom, sit around the "glowing stove" boiling cane and listening to Old David Georgia tell tales. Tom becomes irate when someone suggests that Louisa received a gift of silk stockings from Bob. When he tells the group, "She's my gal," Will Manning laughs. Tom starts a fight with him, but several of Will's friends come to his defense. They run into the woods when Tom pulls a knife. Tom returns to town and goes to Louisa's house, where she is sitting on the front step. After telling Louisa how often he thinks of her and how hard he works, he asks her if the rumors are true about her relationship with Bob. When she asks him what he would do if they were true, he replies, "Cut him jes like I cut a nigger." Tom sits beside her and they hold hands while they watch an old woman hang a lantern at the well. As the old woman sings, Louisa and Tom join her. Eventually, the whole street is singing the refrain mentioned at the end of Part 1.

The third and final section of the story opens with Bob Stone leaving his home to meet Louisa. He thinks about his family and how they might react if they knew of his relationship with Louisa. He wishes he could just take Louisa whenever he wanted, as would have been the case during the days of slavery. He also reflects vaguely about the source of his attraction to Louisa and what her race means to him, concluding that "it was because she was nigger that he went to her." He has heard of Tom's interest in Louisa, and it makes him angry: "No nigger had ever been with his girl."

His path to the canefield leads him to the same group of men that Tom has just left. He overhears them talking about Tom's temper. One man says that "Tom Burwell's been on th gang three times fo cuttin men." The men ponder what Tom will do to Bob when he meets him. Bob stumbles away feverishly and throws himself on the ground. When he finally continues on to his meeting place with Louisa she is not there, and he concludes that she is with Tom Burwell. He sets out for factory town. On his way, he stumbles over

a dog. When the dog yelps, animals awaken and begin to yelp, cackle, or crow. Singers in town become silent. As Tom and Louisa huddle together in the silence, Bob appears. He lunges at Tom twice, and each time Tom easily knocks him to the ground. When Bob persists, Tom begins beating him, and Bob pulls a knife. Tom then pulls his own knife and slashes Bob's throat. As Bob staggers toward the white part of town, those who witnessed the fight go into their houses, except for Louisa and Tom. "Dazed" and "hysterical," Louisa slumps down against the well, while Tom "seem[s] rooted" next to it.

When Bob reaches Broad Street, he collapses in the arms of the white men. A mob quickly gathers and heads toward the factory town, where they grab Tom, tie his wrists and drag him into the deserted cotton mill. There, they tie him to a stake, pile wood around him, and burn him alive. The mob watches and yells as Tom is tortured and killed. Meanwhile, Louisa is still on her front step, but she is not aware of the noise.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

The story begins with Louisa, a young black woman, returning home from a long day's work at the white folks' home - Mr. and Mrs. Stone's place. She is humming a song as she walks in the moonlight to her home among the small shanties in a factory town.

She is thinking about Bob Stone, the son of the people she works for, and Tom Burwell who everyone calls Big Tom. Both boys are in love with her and she is undecided which one she should commit to. Bob is white and the son of the people she works for, while Big Tom is black and works in the fields during the day. She believes that Bob will be the man she chooses, not only because he spends more time with her (Tom spends his days far away in the fields), but also because Bob represents an opportunity to escape from her life in poverty. Tom, she feels, would actually tie her more closely to her current life of poverty and labor.

Louisa is expecting to meet with Bob in the cane fields in an hour, but she believes that Tom is actually about to propose to her. Yet, she is not able to distinguish her feelings for either of them and decide which one she would rather be with.

Chapter 1 Analysis

The story immediately establishes the poverty-stricken world for Louisa. It also sets up the struggle between white and black, wealth and poverty, owners and laborers. Louisa knows that both men love her but she knows she is more likely to choose the white man who has the ability to take her away from her poverty. The fact that she cannot easily choose Bob, however, indicates that she is aware of the cultural pressures that encourage her to remain with her own people, represented by Tom. Love itself has become a secondary consideration for Louisa.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Tom is now introduced, and discloses more about the lifestyle in the factory town. Tom and several other black men are sitting around a campfire, listening to an old black man tell stories of the old days of white folks, moonshining, and cotton picking. It is during these stories that Tom hears two other workers joking about Louisa and her relationship with Bob. Tom becomes jealous and claims that Louisa is his; the other men laugh at him. He pulls a knife and threatens them but they run away in fear because they know that Tom has spent time in jail for violence. Tom stalks off to the factory town and finds Louisa sitting on her porch.

He declares his love for her and tries to explain to her that he can give her whatever the white folks can because he is a good, hard-working man. He tells her he has heard the stories about her and Bob but does believe them. Tom asks Louisa if these stories are true but she pretends that she does not know what he means. Tom tells her that no man, including Bob, better try anything with her or they will end up on the end of his knife.

Meanwhile, Bob is on his way to meet Louisa and is fantasizing about how nice it would be to be able to have an open relationship with her and not have to sneak around in the cane fields. He believes this is not possible because of what his parents and his friends up north would say if they knew he loved a black woman. He thinks how, in the time of masters and slaves, he could have done what he liked with a black woman and nobody would have thought anything of it.

Bob also has heard rumors about Louisa and Tom but, like Tom, does not believe this gossip. He does not think that his Louisa would choose to be with a black man instead of him. While Bob is sneaking through the cane fields to see Louisa, however, he hears the men at the campfire talking about what Tom will do to Bob if Tom ever finds proof that Bob is having relations with Louisa.

Bob becomes furious and stumbles to his and Louisa's meeting place only to find that she is not there. He is convinced that she is with Tom and he rushes to her house to confront her. He finds Tom there.

Bob starts a fight with Tom that ends with Bob getting his throat cut by Tom. Bob dies, but not before he stumbles into town where there are other white people; he tells them that Tom is responsible. These people then form a mob and lynch Tom for the murder.

Louisa sits on her porch in disbelief and wonders where her neighbors are.

Chapter 2 Analysis

The two main struggles are introduced on a larger scale: wealth versus poverty and black against white. Both these struggles are highly intertwined.

The wealth versus poverty struggle is clearly illustrated through Louisa's inability to choose which man she wants to be with. She knows that Bob is not part of her lifestyle, but she cannot choose Tom because she knows that choice means she will never escape her life of struggle. Her culture and her lifestyle tell her that Tom should be the man she chooses, but her dream of having something better makes this choice impossible.

The black against white struggle is explored through the tension between Bob and Tom. While Tom would have killed any man to keep Louisa for himself, Bob's decision to fight Tom rather than walk away from a fight he could not win was based on his belief that, as a white man, he either could not lose, or should not back down. The black versus white tension is also clearly expressed by the lynching and the fact that the people in Louisa's community did not come out to help. They would usually come out in the evening to listen to her sing, or would gather to share stories, but as soon as a white mob formed to lynch Tom, none of Louisa's people were to be found.

The intertwining of the struggles between wealth and poverty and black and white is shown through Louisa. While she may think that she is in control of the situation and that she actually has a choice she can make, this is not the case. As far as Bob was concerned, Louisa did not have the right to choose someone other than him, but, at the same time, Louisa would never have been given the opportunity to marry Bob either. Her poverty keeps her from choosing Tom and her race prevents her from being permitted to choose Bob.

Characters

Tom Burwell

Tom Burwell is the African-American man who loves Louisa, a kitchen maid in the house of the Stone family. Because Tom works all day in the fields, he has little time to spend with her or even to show his feelings for her. Even when he is with her in the evenings, he seems to be somewhat shy in expressing himself: "Strong as he was with hands upon the ax or plow, he found it difficult to hold her." Known in the town by the nickname "Big Boy," he has a reputation for losing his temper and for using his knife as a threat and as a weapon. Although he admits to having "cut two niggers," one of the workmen says that he has "been on th gang three times fo cuttin men." When a man suggests that Bob Stone gave Louisa silk stockings, Tom quickly asserts that she is his "gal." Will Manning laughs at this statement, and Tom knocks him down, pulling a knife on him and the friends who come to Will's defense. When Bob Stone challenges him, Tom easily kills the other man. Tom is burned to death by a white mob immediately after the fight.

Louisa

Louisa is a light-skinned African-American woman who is loved by both Tom Burwell, a black field hand, and Bob Stone, son of the white planter who employs her. As she walks home from her job, she anticipates her usual meeting with Bob in the canefield, even as she imagines that Tom will soon propose marriage to her. She feels a "strange stir" within herself, which she senses is caused by her unresolved relationships with Bob and Tom. She seems to have not been honest with either man regarding her interactions with the two of them. Thus, when Tom shows up at her home and questions her about Bob, she avoids answering him directly. Louisa's indecisiveness and lack of honesty contribute to the violent and fatal confrontation between Tom and Bob. After witnessing the fight and Tom's confrontation with the white mob, Louisa sits alone on the steps of her house, singing and dreaming that Tom may reappear.

Bob Stone

Bob Stone, the youngest son of a white planter, has an affair with Louisa, a black woman who works for his family as a servant. He is killed in a confrontation with her black suitor, Tom Burwell. As a member of a Southern white family that once owned slaves, he feels that he has the right to enjoy a sexual relationship with an African-American woman who is also a domestic servant in his household. Nonetheless he becomes embarrassed when he thinks about how his mother, sister, or his friends up North would react if they knew about his relationship with her. He thinks nostalgically of "the good old days" when a white slave owner could do as he pleased with his slave women. Bob reveals his jealousy and anger when he learns that Tom has been at Louisa's house shortly before Bob was planning to meet her. Particularly irksome to him

is the thought that Louisa may have been intimate with Tom. Bob's possessiveness and jealousy lead him to instigate the scuffle with Tom and then to make the fatal decision to challenge Tom with a knife.

Themes

Racism

White racism within the context of the segregated South is one of the major themes in "Blood-Burning Moon." The town in which Louisa, Tom, and Bob live is rigidly segregated, a hill dividing the "white town" from the shanties of the black "factory town." Although slavery no longer exists, the pattern of impoverished blacks working for wealthy whites continues: Louisa works as a domestic servant in the Stone family household, while Tom works as a field hand for the same family.

Bob Stone's racism is a significant component of both his attraction to Louisa and his furious jealousy towards Tom. Stone nostalgically recalls the days of slavery, when a white master could have any black woman he chose. He sees the need to hide his sexual relationship with Louisa as a sign that the Stones have "lost ground." The thought that he might have a black rival is intolerable to him: "No sir. No nigger had ever been with his girl. He'd like to see one try. Some position for him to be in. Him, Bob Stone, of the old Stone family, in a scrap with a nigger over a nigger girl. In the good old days . . . Ha! Those were the days." Stone's racism also appears to fuel his foolhardy attack on Tom: "Fight like a man," he tells Tom, "and I'll lick ya."

The story's most drastic example of white racism, of course, is the lynching of Tom. The white men don't question what happened during the fight, nor do they even consider the possibility of a trial. Instead, they immediately set off to torture, burn, and kill Tom.

Love and Passion

In examining the feelings of both Bob Stone and Tom Burwell toward Louisa,"Blood-Burning Moon" probes the relationship between love, lust, racism, and a need to dominate.

As Bob Stone sets out to meet Louisa in the cane field, his thoughts reflect the confusion of his feelings for her and the blocks that his racism sets up against the possibility of any tender, human emotion towards her. His thoughts of her are continually qualified by her blackness, although he is unable to define the difference that her blackness makes: "She was lovely—in her way. Nigger way. What way was that? Damned if he knew.... Beautiful nigger gal. Why nigger? Why not, just gal? No, it was because she was nigger that he went to her." His own thoughts, however, suggest that her blackness is important to him because the racist superiority he feels toward her enhances his feeling of mastery and possession. This is suggested early on in the passage, when he imagines himself back in the days of slavery: "He saw Louisa bent over that hearth. He went in as a master should and took her.... [H]is family still owned the niggers, practically." The interrelatedness of racism and possession is emphasized again in Bob's frenzied reaction to the thought of Tom Burwell's rivalry: "No nigger had

even been with his girl.... Some position for him to be in. Him, Bob Stone, of the old Stone family, in a scrap with a nigger over a nigger girl." While Tom's interest in Louisa is a threat to Bob's sexual possession of her, Tom's blackness is a threat to the feeling of racial superiority that makes that possession so gratifying.

Tom's feeling for Louisa, on the other hand, is presented as more tender and genuine. In contrast with Bob's boldness and directness, Tom is tongue-tied in Louisa's presence. Instead of seeking an assignation in a cane field, he comes to her doorstep, respectfully confesses his love, and sits holding her hand. His feelings, however, like Bob's, are touched by a desire for possession and control. In offering to buy her what she "gets from white folks now" and in threatening to knife any rival, he reveals that he, too, sees Louisa as a possession to be purchased or won rather than as a free agent with the right to choose.

Identity

For both of the main male characters in "Blood-Burning Moon," identity is inextricably mixed up with issues of sexual possession and race. Bob Stone defines himself largely in terms of his ability to dominate black people. Setting out to meet Louisa, his thoughts become "consciously a white man's." The limits on his right to Louisa seem a personal affront, an indication that his family has "lost ground" since slave days. The possibility that Tom may be a rival poses an even greater threat to his identity: "Some position for him to be in. Him, Bob Stone, of the old Stone family, in a scrap with a nigger over a nigger girl." When he overhears black workers discussing their rivalry, he becomes nearly senseless with rage. Ultimately, possession of Louisa and dominance of Tom are so essential to his sense of who he is that he risks and loses his life trying to enforce them.

For Tom, too, dominance and control are essential to his sense of identity. The mere suggestion that the woman he has chosen might prefer another man leads him to pull a knife on Will Manning, and he tells Louisa that he has already knifed two men for making the same sort of suggestion. His need to dominate places him in an impossible dilemma when Bob Stone confronts him. To back down meekly in front of Louisa would be contrary to everything he is, but to fight a white man means certain death.

Style

Setting

Set in an unnamed town in the American South during the early part of the twentieth century, "Blood-Burning Moon" tells the story of an ultimately fatal rivalry between two men, one white and one black, for the love of a black woman. Segregation and Jim Crow laws are still in effect, and white supremacy shapes and threatens the lives of the African-American members of the community. Within this historical and social context, the events and eventual conflict between Tom Burwell and Bob Stone take place during the early evening hours while the full moon—an evil omen in African-American folklore—is rising. This also adds to the sinister and foreboding atmosphere that pervades the story.

Point of View

The story is told in the third person, from the perspective of each of the three main characters in turn. Thus, each section of the story is told from what is called a limited omniscient point of view: the third person narrator sees into the mind of a single character and recounts the events of that part of the story from that character's perspective. In the first section, the narrator tells the reader Louisa's thoughts as she walks home. The narrator in the second section relates Tom Burwell's thoughts and experience beginning with his visit to the cane boiling and ending with his visit to Louisa. The third section begins with Bob Stone's thoughts as he leaves his house before his planned meeting with Louisa in the canebreak and follows them until his confrontation with Tom. At this point the narrator switches to a simple third-person point of view, reporting events from the outside, until the very end of the story, which ends as it began with Louisa's point of view.

Imagery

As the title suggests, the moon is a principal image in "Blood-Burning Moon." The story begins and ends with the image of "the full moon in the great door," and each of the story's three parts ends with a refrain from the song that the women improvise to counter the moon's "evil omen." The description of its movement and its reflecting light helps set the ominous mood of the story and foreshadows the violence to come.

In addition to the belief that the full moon represents an evil omen, several other folkloric beliefs about the moon lend it symbolic significance in the story. The full moon has traditionally been associated with the unleashing of powerful emotions, especially those associated with animal instincts. The story of the transformation of a man into a werewolf during the full moon is an example of this tradition. When the women stop singing against the threat of the full moon, Tom and Bob have their fatal encounter. The moon is also traditionally associated with women. The Greco-Roman goddess of the

moon, Artemis or Diana, is a chaste goddess, and the white of the moon is associated with chastity. The redness of the moon in the story might be interpreted as a sign of Louisa's lack of chastity.

The moon also plays a part in the imagery of dark and light that pervades the story and parallels its racial conflict between black and white. Each scene is bathed in an eerie glow, whether from the moon, the glow of the cane fire, the searchlights of the lynch mob, or the fire in which the mob burns and kills Tom. Usually white, but here described as a "red nigger moon," the moon throughout the story is about to be engulfed or is being engulfed in a "deep purple" bank of clouds. The image of white obscured by dark is repeated when Bob Stone first appears: "The clear white of his skin paled, and the flush of his cheek turned purple."

Structure

"Blood-Burning Moon" is divided into three sections. The first section and the end of the third are told from Louisa's point of view. In this way, Toomer frames the story with Louisa's point of view and her aloneness. Each section also ends with the song: "Red nigger moon. Sinner! / Blood-burning moon. Sinner! / Come out that fact'ry door." The first two instances of the song foreshadow the violence and death that will occur, while all three emphasize the central image of the moon and serve to unify the three sections. This division of the story into three parts, each of which ends with the same refrain, is reminiscent of the structure of folksongs and ballads.

Modernism

Modernism is a literary style and movement of the first half of the twentieth century. It was marked by a break with traditional literary forms and a rejection of mainstream Western civilization and culture. "Blood-Burning Moon" can be seen as a modernist text primarily because of its experimental style and its unorthodox treatment of African-American life. The story's lyrical, rhythmic prose, its song-like structure, and its shifting perspectives represent a departure from the style and techniques of conventional pre-twentieth century literary storytelling. Its frank and complex depiction of racial conflict in the segregationist South also contrasts sharply with the images of African-American life typical in earlier American literature, which tended either to sentimentalize or to sensationalize the topic.

Historical Context

The Harlem Renaissance

During the 1920s, Harlem, a section of New York City, became the largest African-American urban area in the country. After World War I, there had been a large migration of rural Southern African Americans to large Northern cities in search of employment. Many of Harlem's residents were professionals, including doctors, lawyers, judges, and teachers.

Within the Harlem community, a small but influential group of mostly college-educated intellectuals strove to encourage racial pride among African Americans. Writers and artists sought to define and express a specifically African-American identity, experience, and culture. This movement became known as the Harlem Renaissance. One of the most well-known artists was Aaron Douglas. In 1925, Alain Locke, an African-American philosopher who had graduated from Harvard and Oxford, published *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance,* an anthology of African-American poetry, fiction, drama, and art. Toomer's book *Cane,* published in 1923, was one of the first to depict African-American identity in terms of the South, slavery, and the persistence of white racism.

Writers of the Harlem Renaissance include Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, James Weldon Johnson, Arna Bontemps, Claude McKay, Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larsen, and Jessie Redmon Fauset, who was literary editor of the African-American magazine *Crisis* from 1919 to 1926.

Harlem also became known as a center for jazz musicians who brought their music from the South. They often played in big bands at nightclubs such as the Cotton Club. White New Yorkers would come to Harlem to hear such famous musicians as Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington.

Southern Culture and Segregation

In 1896, the Supreme Court decision in Plessy vs. Ferguson upheld the right of states to allow racial segregation. The decision was based upon the idea of "separate but equal." Southern states began to pass segregation laws that separated white people from African Americans in most aspects of daily life. These laws were known as Jim Crow laws. By the early 1920s, the South was segregated with respect to housing, education, medical care, religious institutions, and within public buildings. Not only were there separate schools and hospitals, but there were even separate restrooms and drinking fountains. Federal rulings and laws against legal segregation did not occur until the 1950s.

Besides legal segregation, African Americans in the South were also victims of violent activity by the Ku Klux Klan. This organization was dedicated to a belief in white

supremacy. Throughout the South, members of the Klan would attack and sometimes kill African Americans and destroy their property. They also victimized whites who sympathized openly with African Americans and supported equal rights. By 1923, the Klan also had begun to gain political power in the United States.

Violence against African-Americans, however, was not committed solely by members of the Ku Klux Klan. Other white supremacists also participated in lynching hundreds of African-American men during the 1920s. Often, the excuse for a lynching was an unproven accusation that the man had raped a white woman. An anti-lynching crusade also began during this time, under the strong influence of Ida B. Wells, a former slave. An attempt to pass a federal anti-lynching law, however, failed.

Critical Overview

"Blood-Burning Moon" is often praised for its musical prose, reminiscent of the rhythms of jazz, and for its depiction of the effects of racism on African-American men and women in the American South. The collection of which it is a part, *Cane,* is generally considered to be one of the finest as well as one of the earliest works of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s - a period of outstanding literary achievement and innovation by such African-American writers as Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, and Zora Neale Hurston. Recently, some critics have also considered "Blood-Burning Moon" to be a modernist work. Modernism is a literary movement of the first part of the twentieth century that rejected traditional writing styles and tended to be critical of social conventions. Although its original publication was limited, *Cane* was well received by many writers and critics, including W. E. B. Du Bois and Sherwood Anderson; it has often been compared with *Winesburg, Ohio,* Anderson's collection of interrelated short stories. Since its republication in 1969, *Cane* has received increasing critical attention for its experimental style and its portrayal of African-American life in the rural South. Toomer called the book a "swan song" for a dying culture.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4
- Critical Essay #5

Critical Essay #1

Phillips has taught in the English Department at the University of California-Riverside and at several other schools. In the following essay, she discusses the elements of Cane, *the collection "Blood-Burning Moon" originally appeared in, that connect it to Modernism and to the Harlem Renaissance. She also discusses Toomer's depiction of racism in the South in the 1920s.*

With its unconventional style and experimental form, Jean Toomer's *Cane,* which includes the story "Blood-Burning Moon," continues to puzzle those who wish to classify it as either an early Modernist text or a work of the Harlem Renaissance. Traditionally Toomer has been viewed primarily as a member of the Harlem Renaissance, a movement involving African-American writers and artists in the 1920s that emphasized black culture and identity. During this period, black authors such as Toomer, Langston Hughes, and Zora Neale Hurston received their first widespread recognition and serious critical appraisal. More recently, however, critics have sought to identify *Cane* with the Modernist movement, which began shortly after World War I when writers and artists began to create works that broke away from traditional literary forms and that rejected Western civilization and culture, often in response to the disillusionment caused by the destruction and devastation of the World War. Critic Linda Wagner-Martin asserts that with its "fragmentary structure and mixed genre base," *Cane* should be considered "a modernist tour de force."

Indeed, Toomer's work is experimental in form and unprecedented in the range and depth of its realistic representations of African-American experience. As Houston Baker explains, most writing about African Americans in the 1920s fell into one of two categories. Either it followed the "Plantation Tradition" (depicting black mammies and Uncle Toms), or it resorted to contemporary images designed to interest a white audience "in search for the bizarre and the exotic," those "who caught the A-train to Harlem," wearing their raccoon coats and drinking bathtub gin. Toomer, instead, writes about the complexity of African-American culture and experience without avoiding its violent heritage. Further, he distinguishes between the experiences of living in the rural South and the urban North. The six short stories in Part I of *Cane* are set in rural locations, often in the cane fields; the seven prose sketches in Part II are set in Washington D.C. and Chicago, in the urban landscape of industrialization.

"Blood-Burning Moon," the final story in Part I, is a distillation of Toomer's condemnation of white racism and the violence and enmity that pervaded rural Southern culture. During the 1920s, not only did segregation affect most aspects of daily life in the South, but the lynching of African-American men was increasing. Having lived in a rural part of Georgia for a short period of time, Toomer was acutely aware of the threatening circumstances under which African Americans lived in the South. Thus as Baker states, "['Blood-Burning Moon'] is a work that protests, in unequivocal terms, the senseless, brutal and sadistic violence perpetrated against the black man by white America."

In order to achieve his depiction of racial hatred, Toomer creates a romantic conflict between Bob Stone and Tom Burwell for possession of Louisa. While Tom loves Louisa and wants to marry her, Bob's interest in Louisa is based upon sexual passion. The centrality of a female character is crucial in several ways for the development of Toomer's themes of both racism and African-American culture. Richard Eldridge suggests that through Louisa, Toomer brings together "with dramatic intensity the love and hate, beauty and ugliness that live side by side in the twilight zone of the interracial South." One way Toomer brings together love and hate is by Louisa's passivity. She likes being desired by both men, so she does not actively choose one or the other. Even though she anticipates Tom's marriage proposal, she thinks it can "be indefinitely put off." Furthermore, when she thinks of Tom and Bob separately, there is "no unusual significance to either one." Thus, through Louisa's passive response and indecisiveness the space is created for romantic love and racial hatred to collide and explode into violence.

Although Bob's racial hatred is revealed through his violent conflict with Tom, his racist beliefs are also embedded in his relationship with Louisa. Bob neither loves Louisa nor considers marrying her. Rather, he enjoys their regular meetings in the canebrake where he can satisfy his sexual desire for her. Bob still lives in the "twilight zone" of the Southern white culture that owned slaves. In fact, he thinks that "his family still owned the niggers, practically." Because Louisa works as a servant in the Stone family kitchen, Bob goes even further and imagines "the good old days": "He saw Louisa bent over the hearth. He went in as a master should and took her." Bob's fantasy clearly reveals the white man's continued belief in his right to the sexual ownership of African-American women, in addition to their labor. Yet, Bob also knows that his seduction and sexual possession of Louisa is not absolute and indisputable as it was under slavery, nor is it now socially acceptable. He blushes when he thinks about his mother or sister learning of his liaison with Louisa. He also becomes both embarrassed and indignant when he thinks about the possibility of trying to explain the relationship to his Northern friends. More importantly, Bob's fantasy is impossible because Louisa is a free woman who can choose whether or not to meet in the canebrake and with whom she will do so. When Bob repeats several times that "his family has lost ground," he is acknowledging the white man's loss of absolute power over the sexual possession of African-American women.

Bob's racism as exemplified in his continuing master/slave mentality culminates in his conflict with Tom. Because he maintains the belief in his right to possess Louisa sexually, he is outraged at the possibility that Tom has been with her. "No nigger had ever been with his girl." Because he believes in his racial superiority to Tom, Bob is further astounded that he might have to fight him for Louisa. Bob thinks to himself, "Bob Stone, of the old Stone family, in a scrap with a nigger over a nigger girl." In "the good old days," this situation would never have occurred, since an African-American man was deprived of his power and, in many ways, his manhood. Yet slavery had ended, and as William Fischer states, "Tom's success in representing himself as a man worthy of Louisa's love is a direct affront to Bob Stone's white manhood." Indeed, Bob's manhood seems bound to his belief in his racial superiority and his power over others.

The final and fatal conflict between Tom and Bob brings into the open the racial supremacy that has been seething under the skin of Bob and lurking in the hearts of the other white men. When he doesn't find Louisa at their meeting spot, Bob becomes enraged. He has lost his power to either control or seduce her; and, furthermore, he has been replaced by Tom. In other words, the power of the white man over the African-American woman has been rendered impotent both by her own volition and by the presence of the African-American man. Hence, Stone's assurance of his racial superiority has been destabilized.

This is particularly evident when Bob first begins to fight. His initial challenge is to lunge at Tom. When that is unsuccessful, Bob tries a verbal challenge: "Fight like a man, Tom Burwell, an I'll lick y." Again, Tom remains rational and calm while he easily "fl[ings] him to the ground" for the second time. It is only when Bob resorts to using a racial slur, "you godam nigger you," that Tom is provoked to fight in earnest. When it becomes apparent that Tom is winning, Bob pulls out his knife. Neither his own physical strength nor the power of his words are adequate to weaken or destroy Tom. Instead, at the same time his white supremacy fails him, Tom slashes his throat with one "blue flash" of the "steel blade."

If Stone's notion of his racial superiority has failed him as an individual, the entire white male community will compensate by uniting as a lynch mob. The effective power of racism is to be found in numbers, not in the perception and attitude of one individual. Only as a group do the individual white men gain sufficient power to lynch Tom. Drawing strength from their communal racial hatred, the mob acts to deprive Tom of his power and his manhood, thereby eliminating the possibility of racial equality. As Fischer explains, "should a young boy grow into manhood with his body and heart basically intact, as Tom Burwell does, then this living black embodiment of the white folks' envy and fear . . . can still be exorcised, as Toomer shows us, by means of a sanctioned social ritual." Toomer graphically describes Tom's tortured death under the gaze of the disorderly mob. In this way, Toomer clearly implicates white supremacy and its threatened dissolution by an increasingly vital community of African-Americans as the reason for the violence in the South. Although slavery had ended, the power relations based upon white dominance of African Americans persisted. When threatened, the use of violence was a prevention against any shift in the prevailing power structure.

After witnessing the bloody fight and the subsequent confrontation between Tom and the white mob, Louisa is on the verge of insanity. She does not need to witness Tom's lynching to know what is happening. "She lives," as Patricia Chase describes, "like many of Toomer's women, in the here and now." Since she concerns herself only with the present moment, she hasn't given much thought to her past or to the possible consequences of her actions. "Thus," Chase continues, "how can she comprehend when the past crashes together with the present before her?" In order to make sense of what happened, Louisa would have to understand her own actions as well as the history of her African-American community.

To understand the racism that structures "Blood-Burning Moon" is, however, to grasp only one significant aspect of Toomer's story. Interwoven with the issues of racism are

issues of class and gender, especially as they relate to the African-American struggle for survival in the aftermath of slavery. For example, the association of the full moon with women, as well as other aspects of African-American culture, is another worthy topic of consideration. "Blood-Burning Moon" is a story that can be read and reread with increasing satisfaction. With each reading, previously unseen facets of the story and its style reflect more aspects of the African-American identity and history that Toomer wished to convey.

Source: Jane Phillips, "An Overview of 'Blood-Burning Moon'," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 1999.

Critical Essay #2

Blackwell teaches English at Florida A & M University. In the following excerpt, first published in 1974, she presents her view of how Toomer uses moon imagery in "Blood-Burning Moon."

In "Blood-Burning Moon," we find these lines: "Up from the dusk the full moon came. Glowing like a fired pine-knot, it illumined 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." The story involves Louisa, a black woman, who works for a white family. Bob Stone, the young son of that family, is in love with her. Tom Burwell, a young and powerfully built black man, is also in love with her. After Tom is chided by his friends about Louisa and Bob Stone, he decides that he has had enough and leaves to find Bob Stone. He then "shuddered when he saw the full moon rising toward the cloud-bank." Before going to Bob Stone, however, he stopped to talk to Louisa on her front steps. At that point "the full moon sank upward into the deep purple of the cloud-bank." And various people on the street began to sing:

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

Finally, after Bob came to look for Louisa, finding her with Tom Burwell, it is the white man who attacks first. Tom cuts him so badly that he barely made it back to Broad Street before collapsing. That same night white men lynch Tom by tying him to a stake inside the abandoned factory and burning it down. From where she sits, Louisa cannot hear the yelling of the lynchers, but she opens her eyes and sees "the full moon glowing in the great door. The full moon, an evil thing, an omen, soft showering the homes of folks she knew." She wonders where these people are, and decides to sing, hoping "they'd come out and join her." Anyway, she had to sing to the moon, for "the full moon in the great door was an omen."

While this tale is a realistic account of the lynching of a black man, there is constantly present the mysticism that has surrounded the moon forever. There is also what most people today would call "superstition," which is made explicit when Tom, after watching the moon move "towards the cloud-bank," thinks to himself that he "didnt give a godam for the fears of old women." And . . . the moon symbolizes the eye of God as it sinks "upward into the deep purple of the cloud-bank." Clouds symbolize the presence of God, while "purple" is symbolically the color of sorrow and penitence. The blood-red moon is frequently used, as in some of the works of Flannery O'Connor, to symbolize the Host drenched in blood. According to the Old Testament, sacrifices, both human and animal, were made under certain forms of the moon, which are frequently explained in the Bible. In this story, the moon is rising toward a dark cloud. Thus God is symbolically trying to hide his face from the evil that is about to take place. When she begins to sing after the lynching, Louisa hopes that her people will come out to join her, and she thinks that perhaps Tom Burwell might come, too. This suggests a Christ-like sacrifice with the possibility of resurrection.

Source: Louise Blackwell, "Jean Toomer's *Cane* and Biblical Myth," in *Jean Toomer: A Critical Evaluation,* edited by Therman B. O'Daniel, Howard University Press, 1988, pp. 437-44.

Critical Essay #3

Eldridge teaches in the English Department at the Community College of Baltimore. In the following excerpt from an article originally published in 1979, he discusses Toomer's use of imagery to develop his characters and themes.

"Blood-Burning Moon," the final piece in Part 1 [of *Cane*], is the story that typifies most dramatically the conflict and the union of black and white. A black and a white male, inseparable enemies, destroy each other over a woman who wants them both. Louisa, the focus of both men's love, stands as yet one more woman in Toomer's tales whose passivity, indecision, and self-directed concerns wreak destruction. The fulcrum of a seesaw courtship, she equally desires, and is equally desired by, her black and her white lover. The white Bob Stone and the black Tom Burwell are but reflections of each other; their significance is their togetherness. Louisa feels their complementary pull as she is returning home from work: Tom's "black balanced, and pulled against, the white of Stone, when she thought of them." Her "strange stir," the foreboding of evil to come, is caused by both: "she tried to fix upon Bob or Tom as the cause of it." Trying to separate Bob's courting her in the canebrake from Tom's marriage proposal makes each lover that much more important: together they shrouded her confidence like the clouds about to cover the moon and sent her to sing and the dogs to howl.

The dogs and chickens, like other beasts of intuition, anticipate imminent danger and form a constant link among the fates of Bob, Tom, and Louisa. The animals hoot and cackle as they pick up the significance of Louisa's worrying "tremor." When Tom Burwell becomes filled with rage because his friends laugh about Bob and Louisa's liaison, the dogs again start barking, and the roosters crow. Bob, himself burning with jealousy, stumbles over a dog, sending yelps, cackles, and crows reverberating across the countryside. When the threesome are about to converge, however, all noise has stopped, as though the animals are waiting for the final battle.

The link between Bob and Tom is not only through Louisa's thoughts and the animals' alarm. Tom and Bob are mirrors of each other even in their actions. Much as their background and social expectations differ, they are bound together because they love the same woman. Bob Stone claims racial superiority, yet he is an emotional mixture which reflects the white and the black of the Southern society: "The clear white of his skin paled, and the flush of his cheeks turned purple." Toomer's color-image of the black peasant's experience, I have noted, is dusk, and fruit-purple. Bob Stone pales and purples simultaneously; the whiter he gets the darker he gets. Having arrived at his meeting place but not finding Louisa, Bob is enraged that Tom "had her." Bob bites his lips so hard that he tastes blood: "not his own blood; Tom Burwell's blood." Bob is too overwhelmed with jealousy to think about the incongruity of tasting his enemy's blood in his own veins. Rage has formed a union closer than brotherhood; Bob *is* Tom through the bond of hate.

Though both love Louisa, neither accepts the truth that she has an alternate lover. Both Tom and Bob hear the news from the same source, the men boiling cane at the

canebreak. Both flee from the men uncontrollably angry, refusing to believe the truth about her disloyalty and immediately attempting to seek her out. Tom tells Louisa, "I dont believe what some folks been whisperin.... Bob Stone likes y. Course he does. But not th way folks is awhisperin." Tacitly he knows differently, for Louisa must get her frilly gifts from some lover's source. Bob, too, has been plagued with hints of her unfaithfulness, for "Cartwell had told him that Tom went with Louisa after she reached home." Protesting too much he immediately thinks, "No Sir. No nigger had never been with his girl. He'd like to see one try." In a similar way Tom has overreacted to Louisa's innocent claim that she has no connection with Bob: "Course y dont. Ise already cut two niggers. Had t hon, t tell em so." Jealousy, then, has reduced both men to the same human condition, irrespective of race or caste. Bob is ready to defend his woman in the same way that the antebellum white gentry would defend the purity of a belle. Likewise, Tom Burwell is ready to kill his "master's" son "jes like I cut a nigger." Charged to action by irrational forces, they can no longer delay the inevitable clash, hard as Louisa may try to put it off. Tom's shyness and Bob's secretiveness vanish in preparation for aggressive claims of ownership. The fight is unavoidable, for both have as their "game" the ability to fight with their knives. And, just as inevitably, the killing of one equates the killing of the other. It is not surprising that Bob Stone's last words are "Tom Burwell," or that the last view of Tom is one with "stony" eyes and a head like a "blackened stone."

Except for the stilted, utterly unbelievable speech that Tom Burwell delivers to Louisa, and for the implausible fragment of folk song which is chanted twice to foreshadow the final scene, "Blood-Burning Moon" is among the more effectively constructed short stories in the collection. In Louisa [Toomer] fuses with dramatic intensity the love and hate, beauty and ugliness that live side by side in the twilight zone of the interracial South. "Blood-Burning Moon" embodies the very elements that so attracted, and so repelled, Jean Toomer in his sojourn to find lasting roots in the soil of the South.

Source: Richard Eldridge, "The Unifying Images in Part One of Jean Toomer's *Cane,*" in *Jean Toomer: A Critical Evaluation,* edited by Therman B. O'Daniel, Howard University Press, 1988, pp. 213-36.

Critical Essay #4

Fischer teaches at the State University of New York, Buffalo. In the following excerpt from an article on Cane, *the collection of prose and poetry in which "Blood-Burning Moon" appears, he analyzes the characters of Tom Burwell and Bob Stone and discusses the importance of music in Toomer's work.*

A palpable man . . . does briefly cross Toomer's pages in the last rural piece [of *Cane*], "Blood-Burning Moon." I say briefly, because Tom Burwell, his manly strengths triumphant for a fleeting interval in which he successfully courts his woman and kills a challenging white suitor, is abruptly incinerated on a lynching pyre. Unlike his practice in the previous sketches, Toomer has not assigned a woman's name to the title, even though Louisa is one of the three principal figures in the story, because the experience described is essentially Tom Burwell's, and the force of his living—and dying—is the main focus. But it is his death that stands out finally, not his life, and so the blood-burning madness of the lynching is given to the title, not the name of the man. All the brutalizing influences of white domination that are tacit in the selfishness, frustration, and violence variously associated with Toomer's other men, and manifest in the subsequent anguish of their women, coalesce in the final death ceremony of the lynching. Should all else fail—all the repressive customs and laws of the dominating culture—and should a young boy grow into manhood with his body and heart basically intact, as Tom Burwell does, then this living black embodiment of the white folks' envy and fear (the uncertain supremacy represented by Bob Stone in the story) can still be exorcised, as Toomer shows us, by means of a sanctioned social ritual.

Burwell is not an idealized innocent, nor is he a legend like Barlo [a character in "Esther," another story in *Cane*]. On the one hand his friends characterize him as "one bad nigger when he gets started.... been on th gang three times fo cuttin men," proud and virile praise from those men who know him; and on the other he "come near beatin Barlo," as he tells Louisa, a sign of his considerable strength without the dubious aggrandizement of folk legendry. He too has suffered . . . from malevolent pressures, but he is also capable of touching Louisa profoundly with his love.... Tom woos Louisa directly and poetically with his emotional talk, making her abandon all thoughts of the insistent white lover, Bob Stone, who feels passion for her, but only as an object of sexual possession. Stone, consciously thinking in the tradition of the white Southern male, wants to take her "as a master should," and does not otherwise have any legitimate emotional or humanizing claim: "She was lovely—in her way. Nigger way. What way was that? Damned if he knew." Tom Burwell knows Louisa as a black woman, though, and embodies the very style that will win her. He courts her in a lilting lovemaking dialect that draws from the "common well" of their feelings. But the song Louisa sings in return, although meant to imply her positive response to Tom, is also the portent of his death:

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

An old factory building is where the lynching takes place. Tom's very success in representing himself as a man worthy of Louisa's love is a direct affront to Bob Stone's white manhood, based as the latter is upon a racial supremacy that he tries to assert by means of sexual exploitation. Tom's superior natural appeal to Louisa triggers the racially induced emotional affliction in Bob Stone's mind that makes him challenge Tom in a physical encounter. Tom beats him easily, then fatally slashes him with a razor when Bob pulls a knife, securing the ultimate victory that in turn seals his own fate.

Black and white alike are affected by the psycho-sexual strife rippling just below the surface of the story. Tom has cut up several black men for "tryin t make somethin out a nothin" regarding Bob Stone's relationship with Louisa. But he knows that Bob is in fact a real threat, a reality certified by Toomer's brief representation of the initial conflict in Louisa's mind over the two lovers. She momentarily rationalizes in favor of the white man because her own experience has taught her that she has less of a social obligation to Tom: "To meet Bob in the canebrake, as she was going to do an hour or so later, was nothing new. And Tom's proposal which she felt on its way to her could be indefinitely put off." Although she yields to Tom shortly thereafter, her mental willingness to put him off is both symptomatic of the added strain placed on Tom's natural self-assertion and an ironic foretelling of his permanent elimination at white hands. His manhood, however temporarily ascendant, must be destroyed; and Louisa's womanhood, brought closest to fulfillment of any of Toomer's women, must finally be deprived. Tom represents the ultimate development of the aggregate man Toomer gradually draws out through the fictional rendering of the women, a man at once triumphantly emergent and ruthlessly obliterated in the act of expressing his full potential.

The impressionistic effect of Toomer's writing, both in its imagery and rhythms, is accomplished mainly by simple declarative sentences in uncomplicated and sometimes Spartan language. The work is enigmatic and esoteric, say most readers. This is true in the sense that the style and structure of the book [*Cane*] do not so much invite a meditative literary analysis as an immediate and more emotional response, something like the way one would respond to music. Toomer recognized, as almost every major black American writer has, that music is a primary mode of expression in Afro-American culture, the most direct and accurate expression of Afro-American experience. Song, not surprisingly then, is central to Toomer's conception of the way his writing must speak to the reader. In the instances where it is used in the prose sketches, song is an authenticating medium that communicates subjective qualities about people's experiences that literary prose is less able to convey. The effect of the warring elements in Louisa's mind representing her conflicting responses to the demands of Tom and Bob, black man and white, are most strongly expressed in song. The ambivalence of attraction and fear manifest in her singing corresponds intimately to the underlying durability and terror that conditions the collective black heart in that story. For Tom her song expresses the natural forces of love, while for herself and the other women, as well as for Toomer and the reader, it also stands for the brooding presence of racial bloodlust, the vying of black and white manhood that can only be ominous for them all. Her song becomes the direct articulation of the fear and gruesome finality that looms over all the described events, and she sings in chorus with all black women at the end of each section of the story in the ultimate communal voicing of the loss of their men.

Source: William C. Fischer, "The Aggregate Man in Jean Toomer's *Cane,*" in *Studies in the Novel,* Vol. III, No. 2, Summer, 1971, pp. 190-215.

Critical Essay #5

Chase teaches at Ohio University. In the following excerpt from an essay that discusses female characters in Toomer's collection Cane, *in which "Blood-Burning Moon" appears, she presents her view of the character Louisa.*

If the fabric of *Cane* [the collection in which "Blood-Burning Moon" first appeared] is the life essence and its meaning behind absurdity, then Toomer's women characters are the threads which weave *Cane* together. Like the form in which Toomer chose to express himself, his women characters are no less rare and sensual. Perhaps they are all the same woman, archetypal woman, all wearing different faces, but each possessing an identifiable aspect of womanhood. Each is strange, yet real; each wears a protective mask of indifference; each is as capable of love as well as lust; and each is guilty of or victimized by betrayal—of herself or of a man. There is no aspect of woman that Toomer does not weave inextricably into his archetypal woman, and in the end, through Carrie K., he has fashioned out of flesh and also failure, his vision of woman-kind....

Louisa . . . as well as Tom Burwell and Bob Stone [pays] the price of pride. In describing Louisa, Toomer begins . . . with beauty—soft, sensual, warm. His description of Louisa is lyrical and sweet with the scent of the cane:

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 the fig trees.

Enjoying woman's rare advantage, Louisa has two men in love with her—and does not care to choose between them. But as the "blood-burning" moon symbolizes, all is not calm. One man is black, like Louisa, and the other is white. There is a price to pay that Louisa hasn't considered. Louisa becomes caught in a web of events over which she no longer has control. Lulled by the heat, the heavy, sweet scent of the sugar cane, which carries the aura of death and violence, as well as love, and drugged by the "blood-burning" moon, Louisa has not considered the effects of her actions in the light of her environment and the ways of men. She lives, like many of Toomer's women, in the here and now. In Factory town, only here and now. She is young and reckless, which is youth's gift. Thus how can she comprehend when the past crashes together with the present before her? Not wishing to choose between Tom and Bob, and in her glory, she has forgotten the pride of men.

Separately, there was no unusual significance to either one. But for some reason they jumbled when her eyes gazed vacantly at the rising moon.

Quickly, over before it is begun, violence and death snap Louisa from her dreamy indecision to stark reality.

Blue flash, a steel blade slashed across Bob Stone's throat. Blood began to flow.... Negroes who had seen the fight slunk into their homes and blew the lamps out. Louisa,

dazed, hysterical, refused to go indoors. She slipped, crumbled, her body loosely propped against the woodwork of the well.

With gruesome finality, Tom Burwell is murdered by a white mob for killing a white man, refusing in their fear and hate to investigate the circumstances. They are driven, "blood-burning" with mindless hate, to evil and insane acts of violence. They are the hint of violence that fills the air, always waiting behind the sweet smell of the cane, for the scent of blood and the chance to destroy what they cannot understand.

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.... It fluttered like a dying thing, down the single street of factory town. Louisa, upon the step before her home, did not hear it, but her eyes opened slowly. They saw the full moon glowing in the great door. The full moon, an evil thing, an omen, soft showering the homes of folks she knew. Where were they, these people? She'd sing and perhaps they'd come out and join her. Perhaps Tom Burwell would come.

The horror is more than Louisa can bear. The fear, the injustice, the evil and the finality are more than she can comprehend, and she loses her mind. Her powerlessness and the consequences of her naivete become for a moment clear to her and exact a price—her sanity.... Louisa withdraws to a world beyond the real, where she can no longer be wounded. She has cost a man his life.

Source: Patricia Chase, "The Women in *Cane,*" in *CLA Journal,* Vol. XIV, No. 3, March, 1971, pp. 259-73.

Topics for Further Study

Investigate the resurgence of lynchings in the South during the 1920s and explain why or why not Tom's lynching is representative of what was happening.

Research the anti-lynching crusade that attempted to get federal legislation passed. In addition to Ida B. Wells, who else was involved? What finally happened to the movement?

Research the ways in which segregation was practiced in the South during the 1920s and 1930s. In what other ways might Louisa and Tom have experienced segregation during this period?

Explore symbolic meanings given to the moon in African American folktales and culture. How might various beliefs about the moon suggest different meanings in "Blood-Burning Moon?"

Compare and Contrast

1922: *Abie's Irish Rose,* a play about a racially mixed marriage is performed 2,532 times on Broadway—a record at the time.

1993: *The Crying Game,* a movie exploring themes of racial, sexual, and national identity, becomes a mainstream hit after initially being considered "artistically risky" and playing to small audiences.

1924: The Ku Klux Klan threatens black actor Paul Robeson's life for his portrayal of a white man married to a black woman in Eugene O'Neill's *All God's Chillun Got Wings.*

1996: There are more than one million racially mixed marriages in the United States.

1923: There are 33 reported lynchings in the United States; 29 of the victims are black men. In response to an increase in lynchings, activist Mary B. Talbert begins an anti-lynching crusade. By 1925 the number of lynchings drops to ten.

1998: Three white men in Jasper, Texas, face the death penalty after a racial hate crime in which they chain a black man to the back of a pickup truck and drag him for two miles.

What Do I Read Next?

Cane by Jean Toomer (1923) is the book that includes "Blood-Burning Moon." In addition to short stories, the collection includes poetry and a short drama piece.

Invisible Darkness: Jean Toomer and Nella Larsen (1993), by Charles R. Larson, presents a revision of what has been traditionally written about Jean Toomer's personal life. Larson writes about Toomer's question of his own racial identity, as well as his struggle with spirituality.

The Sleeper Wakes: Harlem Renaissance Stories by Women, edited by Marcy Knopf (1993), includes a selection of short stories by the women writers who were Toomer's contemporaries. Like Toomer, these women write about African-American identity and experience.

Their Eyes Were Watching God, by Zora Neale Hurston (1937), is a novel about African Americans living in the rural South about the same time as the characters in Toomer's book. Hurston was also a writer of the Harlem Renaissance.

Winesburg, Ohio, by Sherwood Anderson, is a novel comprised of short stories about the people living in a small town. *Cane* is often compared with it in terms of style and the theme of rural America.

Further Study

Benson, Brian Joseph and Mabel Mayle Dillard. "Lifting the Veil: *Cane,*" in *Jean Toomer,* Boston: Twayne, 1980, pp. 49-89.

Benson and Dillard discuss their view of the structure and imagery of "Blood-Burning Moon."

Lewis, David Levering. *When Harlem Was in Vogue,* New York: Oxford UP, 1981.

A social and cultural analysis of the Harlem Renaissance, including a discussion of Toomer and his participation in the movement.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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