Cane Study Guide

Cane by Jean Toomer

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Cane Study Guide....1

Contents....2

Introduction....4

Author Biography....5

Plot Summary....6

Chapter 1 "Karintha"....9

Chapter 2 "Reapers"....11

Chapter 3 "November Cotton Flower"....12

Chapter 4 "Becky"....13

Chapter 5 "Face"....15

Chapter 6 "Cotton Song"....16

Chapter 7 "Carma"....17

Chapter 8 "Song of the Son"....19

Chapter 9 "Georgia Dusk"....20

Chapter 10 "Fern"....21

Chapter 11 "Nullo"....23

Chapter 12 "Evening Song"....24

Chapter 13 "Esther"....25

Chapter 14 "Conversion"....27

Chapter 15 "Portrait in Georgia"....28

Chapter 16 "Blood-Burning Moon"....29

Chapter 17 "Seventh Street"....32

Chapter 18 "Rhobert"....33

Chapter 19 "Avey"....34

Chapter 20 "Beehive"....36

Chapter 21 "Storm Ending"....37
Chapter 22 "Theater"....38
Chapter 23 "Her Lips Are Copper Wire"....40
Chapter 24 "Calling Jesus"....41
Chapter 25 "Box Seat"....42
Chapter 26 "Prayer"....44
Chapter 27 "Harvest Song"....45
Chapter 28 "Bona and Paul"....46
Chapter 29 "Kabnis"....49
Characters....54
Themes....61
Style....64
Historical Context....66
Critical Overview....68
Criticism....70
Critical Essay #1....71
Critical Essay #2....75
Critical Essay #3....82
Topics for Further Study....92
Compare and Contrast....93
What Do I Read Next?....94
Further Study....95
Bibliography....96
Copyright Information....97

Introduction

One of the most fascinating aspects about *Cane* is what it failed to accomplish. Despite the glowing praise and anticipation of reviewers, the book only ended up selling two thousand copies. Jean Toomer, who was of mixed blood, decided to stop writing about the black experience, and he had a difficult time publishing works on other subjects. By 1930 he was no longer the promising new literary star, but a literary has-been, only occasionally publishing poems and reviews. He lived for almost forty more years in obscurity. It was not until a new edition of *Cane* came out during the 1960s that the world realized what a stunning achievement the book represents, and it has been in print since then.

Author Biography

It is somewhat ironic that Jean Toomer is remembered as the writer of one of the greatest novels ever written by a black author, because during his lifetime he only published one significant book and he spent very little time among blacks. His mother's family was rich and powerful inLouisiana, where her father, Pickney B. S. Pinch-back, had been the only African American ever to have served as acting governor. Toomer's father, Nathan Toomer Sr., was the son of a slave. His father left soon before Nathan Eugene Toomer was born on December 26, 1894, inWashington, D.C. The author was called Eugene Pinchback during his childhood, and was raised in affluent areas ofNew Orleans andWashington, where he hardly felt the effects of society's racist institutions until he was in high school.

In 1914, he enrolled in theUniversity of Wisconsin to major in agriculture, but quit after he found himself unable to win the race for the class presidency. Following that, he attended the Massachusetts College of Agriculture, then the American College of Physical Training inChicago. In 1916, he became a devotee of socialism and gave lectures on the subject in a room that he rented out. Turned down by the Army during World War I in 1917, he became a Ford salesman inChicago, then a substitute physical education teacher in the Milwaukee School System. In 1918 went to work for a manufacturing company inNew York, where he began to socialize in literary circles.

From 1920 to 1922 Toomer wrote passionately, filling a trunk with poems, essays, short stories, and letters. During this time he made the acquaintance of Waldo Frank, a famous novelist of the time who became his friend and mentor. During March of 1921 Toomer filled in as an administrator at the Sparta Agricultural and Industrial Institute inHancock County, Georgia, where he experienced the lives of rural blacks for the first time, an experience that strongly influenced *Cane.* That summer, feeling that he did not have enough material, he and Frank traveled the South together, with Frank posing as a black man: under the segregated laws of the early 1900s, they both could have been prosecuted or killed if people found out that a black man and a white man were travelling together.

After *Cane,* Toomer did not write about the African-American experience anymore. Being so light-skinned that he was often mistaken for being Indian, Oriental, orMediterranean, he felt that the American black experience was not relevant to him: publishers, however, were only interested in his views regarding the black experience. His long friendship with Waldo Frank ended when he had an affair with Frank's wife. He became involved in different types of spiritualism, especially the teachings of Greek philosopher Georges Gurdjieff, whose Institute for Harmonious Development Toomer worked to popularize inAmerica. His first wife died during childbirth a year after they married; his second marriage lasted more than thirty years, until his death on March 30, 1967, inDoylestown, Pennsylvania. Toomer published some poetry and essays, but never another novel.

Plot Summary

First Section

Cane is not organized like most novels are. It is an impressionistic piece, with many character sketches, stories, and poems that are similar in theme, leaving readers with an overall impression rather than an experience of having followed a unified narrative. Though the smaller parts of *Cane* do not follow a continuing plot, and only a few minor characters are carried over from one chapter to the next, the book still falls into three distinct sections, which Toomer envisioned as leading readers in a circular progression.

The first section takes place in ruralGeorgia, and concerns itself with the lives of poor blacks, especially focusing on women who live in this environment. It starts with the brief, poetic story of Karintha, a black woman who is noticeably beautiful from childhood on. The men all work hard for money to give to her, implying that their ignorance of who she really is and her naïveté work together to repress them all.

"Karintha" is followed by a poem, "Reapers," about a reaping machine with sharp blades being drawn through a field by black horses and cutting a field rat in half. The following poem, "November Cotton Flower," is about one winter, a time of drought, when cotton unexpectedly bloomed, giving hope that led to love.

The book then picks up with the story of Becky, a white woman who has two black children. Nobody in this small town knows who the father or fathers of these boys might be, and both blacks and whites ostracize Becky, although some charitable people try to help her out, donating land, lumber, and food that no one else wants. The boys grow up to be town bullies, ferocious to both blacks and whites. One day Becky's house is found collapsed, with her under the wreckage, unable to survive social disapproval like the rat mowed down by the reaper.

Two more poems follow: "Face," which gives a portrait of a sturdy old woman, and "Cotton Song," which provides a Biblical-sounding chant that might be sung by workers in the field.

The next story, "Carma," concerns a woman whose husband hears that his wife has been unfaithful, and he goes to confront her about it. After the ensuing argument, Carma runs out of the house and into the cane field. Hearing a gunshot, he gathers a group of neighbors to look for her, and when she turns out to be fine, he feels fooled, and, frustrated, slashes the nearest man with a knife. He ends up in prison, in what the story describes twice as "the crudest melodrama."

"Song of the Son" is a poem that presents the sun and earth, with Negro slaves, who sang, identified with nature. "Georgia Dusk" contrasts the previous poem by focusing on the people and machinery that have taken over the land in the decades since slavery. These lead into the story of "Fern," a girl of black and Jewish roots who is presented as

almost totally a product of her environment. The story is lushly told, with little action: the unnamed narrator becomes infatuated with Fern and goes to her, asking her to walk with him in the cane fields, but once she is out there she is overwhelmed with her powerful feelings about the place and she faints.

The poem "Nullo" follows, giving an impressionistic picture of pine needles falling in theGeorgiaforest. "Evening Song" is a poem about a narrator and a woman, Cloine, who lazily dozes off in his arms as the moon rises.

The story "Esther" follows the maturation of a young woman, from nine to sixteen to twenty-two to twenty-seven. Early in life, she witnesses a man, King Barlo, fall into a religious trance in the street, and as years pass Esther becomes more and more convinced that Barlo is destined to be her lover. The story ends when, years later, she goes to offer herself to him, and he and the people he is partying with laugh at her.

There are two more poems: "Conversion" contrasting an ancient African religion with Christianity, and "Portrait inGeorgia," which offers a physical description of a weathered woman who lives in this land. The last part of this section is "Blood-Burning Moon," a story about Louisa, who is courted by two men, one white and one black. When the white man attacks the black man, the white man is killed. A white lynch mob comes, captures the black man, and burns him alive.

Second Section

The second section, which was written at the request of Toomer's publisher in order to bring *Cane* to a decent book length, takes place in the North, in Chicago andWashington, D.C. It opens with the sketch "

Seventh Street," a mix of poetry and prose that describes urban life in the section ofWashington where black people live, emphasizing fast pace and the old-fashioned belief in God. "Rhobert," the following character sketch, shows a strong, suffering man, his legs bent by a childhood disease, who bears his hardships as if wearing his house around on his head.

The story "Avey" presents a girl whom the boys hanging around on the

Washington street corner fantasized about, imagining what she does when she goes upstairs to visit her boyfriend. The narrator of the story finally manages to date her, and she seems only vaguely interested in returning his affection, leading him to the self-comforting conclusion that she is just too lazy for serious commitment. After years pass, he meets her again, and takes her out to a secluded spot in the park, but she falls into a deep, fatigued sleep.

Two poems follow: "Beehive," which compares the city to a beehive, with one bee wishing to fly away to "a far-off farmland flower," and "Storm Ending," which uses similar imagery of bees and flowers, but here they are victims of the violence of a beautiful thunderstorm. The story "Theater" is a brief piece of two upwardly-mobile urban blacks,

John and Dorris: John is the brother of a theater owner, and Dorris dances in the chorus at the theater. She is attracted to him. Watching her dance, he dreams of being her boyfriend, but she thinks that the vacant look on his face while he is looking at her means that he does not care for her, so she leaves before he has the chance to talk to her.

The poem "Hot Lips Are Copper Wire" shows Toomer's amazement at the telephone, a relatively new invention then. "Call Jesus" presents a woman's soul as something separate from her, following her around like a dog. "Box Seat" is a relatively long story about a man, Dan Moore, who is dating a schoolteacher, Muriel. He is sure that she is repressing her true nature, and he tries to force himself on her: first physically, on the couch of her home, and then later by shouting to her in a crowded theater. It ends with Dan going out of the theater to fight with a man he has offended, but then wandering off, having forgotten his anger once he is out of doors.

The poem "Prayer," which follows, is a meditation on the nature of the human soul, followed by "Harvest Song," a poem that presents modern urban people as reapers of the harvest of the world's greatness. The last part of Section Two is the story of Bona, a white woman, and Paul, a mulatto: Bona is interested in dating Paul, and he likes her, but he is hesitant about a relationship because he cannot believe that Bona, raised in the South, would not look on him with some prejudice. In the end, he decides to cast his worries aside, but while he was deliberating she has left.

Third Section

The final section of the book is comprised entirely of the novella "Kabnis," the story of a man of mixed ethnicity, like Toomer, who has gone toGeorgiato teach and finds himself attracted to the beauty of the land and repulsed by the ugliness of the way blacks are treated. At first, he is just lonely, working for a school that has strict rules for its teachers, with his behavior closely monitored. He sees the irony in this, noting that "where they burn and hang men, you cant smoke." In the second part of this section, Ralph Kabnis interacts with some of the local people, important men in town. They tell him stories about the lynchings they have seen, which makes him paranoid, afraid that the local whites will find him too bold and come to get him. He runs home to hide, and when his friends find out what is bothering him, they laugh and give him a drink, which gets him fired.

Kabnis ends up working in the repair shop of his friend, Halsey. The local values have dragged him down, making him give up his intellectual interests and take on physical labor, which was considered the place of black men in the South. While working at the shop, he sinks even further, spending the night drinking with some friends and the prostitutes that they bring over, so that in the morning, when it is time to go to work, he is helpless and cannot even stand up on his own. This leads back to the beginning of the book, with downtroddenGeorgiablacks trapped by society into a cycle of ignorance, drink and lust.

Chapter 1 "Karintha"

Chapter 1 "Karintha" Summary

Jean Toomer's *Cane* is a series of observations and stories about the African American culture of the early 20th century. Toomer's book is somewhat unconventional because the stories are only loosely related to one another, and they are presented through a combination of prose, poetry and verse. Sometimes setting, characters or theme connect the events of the book. The first section is concerned with life near the cane fields of rural Georgia. Prominent themes include spirituality, superstition and racism. In the second section of the book, the setting moves to the urban neighborhoods of Washington, D.C. Here, the distractions of the city tempt and separate the characters from their spirituality and their ability to connect with one another. The last section of the book consists of one longer story, "Kabnis," which brings together the influences of the city and the countryside.

Karintha begins with a song-like verse. The verse describes the color of a woman's skin, comparing it the color of the horizon at dusk.

As the chapter proceeds, the narrator develops a description of Karintha and her progression from girlhood to adulthood in a small Georgia town. She is first introduced as a beautiful and vibrant child who inspires a strong physical attraction in younger and older men. At twelve years old, she is energetic and mischievous, bordering on wild and uncontrollable. Karintha experiments sexually with boys at a young age, and rumors begin to circulate about her.

The narrator then describes Karintha as a young woman. Time has passed since her childhood. She has had many lovers and is disgusted by the old men who try to flirt with her. She still captures the attention of young men. The narrator implies that Karintha has become a prostitute, trading sexual favors for money. He describes the young men who "all want to bring her money."

The narrator continues with the story: Karintha gives birth in the forest. When she returns to town, she still has her beauty, but it seems that her soul has been burnt out. At the end of the chapter, Karintha is twenty years old. The chapter closes with the opening verse, which compares Karintha's skin to the horizon at dusk.

Chapter 1 "Karintha" Analysis

Cane's opening chapter presents a strikingly powerful character sketch of Karintha. Karintha is a young woman whose beauty and inquisitive nature leave her empty and hollow by the time she is twenty years old. The narrator foreshadows Karintha's fate at the end of the first paragraph, when he states that the excessive attention of men could push Karintha into maturity too soon.

As a child, Karintha is described in contrast to the sawmill smoke. The smoke, ever-present, hangs in the air without motion until Karintha, a blur of motion, would run quickly by. Her childhood energy is accepted by the townspeople as almost part of the scenery.

After Karintha gives birth, the sawmill smoke becomes denser. Without the contrasting force of Karintha's youthful energy, the smoke's thick presence is felt in the air and tasted in the water. Karintha's ability to cut through the smoke has presumably evaporated. She is tired and defeated.

Chapter 2 "Reapers"

Chapter 2 "Reapers" Summary

"Reapers" is an eight-line poem told in the first person. The poem describes black field workers sharpening their blades and then chopping silently at the weeds in the field. A horse-pulled mower also moves through the field, cutting everything in its path. The mower's blades slice a field rat, which lets out a squeal. The blade, glistening with the rat's blood, continues chopping weeds.

Chapter 2 "Reapers" Analysis

The poem presents a bleak picture of destruction. The workers sharpen their deadly weapons and continue their slashing without emotion. The blades of the mower cut through the field rat and keep moving. All except for the narrator ignores the evidence of the blades' destruction, the rat's blood. There is a sense of lifelessness in the poem that ties into Karintha's adult state of mind in the previous chapter.

Chapter 3 "November Cotton Flower"

Chapter 3 "November Cotton Flower" Summary

"November Cotton Flower" is fourteen lines of rhyming verse describing the unlikely bloom of a cotton flower in November. The landscape and climate show signs of the impending winter months. The cotton stalks are drying and the streams are low. Dead birds are found at the bottom of the well. In this setting, a beautiful cotton flower blooms. The beauty of the flower overcomes the superstitious tendency of the townspeople. Rather than attribute the unlikely bloom as something superstitious or supernatural, the townspeople look upon the cotton flower with love and appreciation.

Chapter 3 "November Cotton Flower" Analysis

"November Cotton Flower" provides some insight into the mindset of the townspeople in the setting our narrator describes. At first, the landscape is bleak. Death of plant and animal life is the prevailing theme. The unlikely cotton bloom, a symbol of life, is in strong contrast to the dreary surroundings. So great is the contrast that it actually startles the townspeople. The narrator implies that it is typical for folks to attribute a superstitious meaning to an unexpected event, such as the out-of-season bloom. It would not be out of character for folks to see such an event as an omen or a sign of something bad to come. In this case, however, the flower's surprising beauty overcomes this superstitious tendency. Something this beautiful is not to be feared. In essence, the poem describes a human inclination to associate physical beauty with spiritual goodness.

Chapter 4 "Becky"

Chapter 4 "Becky" Summary

This chapter describes a white woman named Becky who is shunned from the community for having two 'Negro' sons. At the opening of the chapter, Becky is already dead. The narrator tells her tale in hindsight.

Becky is a white Catholic, who is physically sunken. Her physical weakness is the result of the judgment and criticism of the townspeople. The whites call her shameless and God-forsaken. The blacks say she is poor and crazy. She will not divulge who the father of her child is. While pregnant, Becky lives off of the charity of others.

Becky's child is born, and she is turned away completely by whites and blacks. A man in charge of the railroad secretly tells Becky that she can live on the strip of land between the railroad and the road. John Stone gives lumber and bricks to Lonnie Deacon, who builds a cabin for Becky on that land. A leaning chimney anchors the cabin, built in the middle of the night. Both John and Lonnie keep their involvement with Becky to themselves for fear of being judged by the townspeople.

Becky lives in her cabin quietly as the trains roll by. Travelers, who throw out scraps of food from the train, know her story. Passersby also leave Becky scraps of paper with scribbled prayers. A few people who live in the town continue to bring her food secretly. Although no one ever sees Becky, her son grows up and is seen running around town.

When the boy is about five years old, Hugh Jourdon sees the boy carrying a baby. Word spreads quickly around town that Becky has had another son. Although everyone knew about it, the subject was not discussed openly.

The two boys grow up to be angry young men, and still there is no sign of Becky. Some wonder whether she has passed away and the boys had buried her. The boys are easily provoked into a fight with a man in town.

The boys are described as being without a race or a people. They are not black or white. They become drifters, neither accepted nor acknowledged by the townspeople. The boys shoot two men and then leave town together, cursing whites and blacks alike.

Becky still lives in the cabin, her presence only made known by the smoke from the chimney. The townspeople begin to bring her food again.

On an autumn Sunday after church, the congregation is heading home via the road that runs by Becky's cabin. Just as the cabin becomes visible from around the corner, the horses show signs of nervousness. The narrator's skin breaks out suddenly in goose flesh, and his mind is filled with fear. The ground trembles as though a train is rolling by, and the cabin's chimney suddenly collapses. Barlo and the narrator are pulled by onlookers to the cabin to see what happened. They believe Becky has been crushed by

the bricks. Barlo throws his bible onto the bricks, and they make a quick escape from the scene. The bible remains on the bricks untouched.

Chapter 4 "Becky" Analysis

Like *Cane*'s first chapter, "Becky" is a character sketch. It is, however, as much about the narrator and the culture of the Georgia town as it is about Becky herself. The chapter is bound by a strong sense of racial tension and a prevailing fear of God and his judgment. Becky, by conceiving two bi-racial children out of wedlock, has been cast aside by both races. Both sides express harsh words of judgment, breaking her down so that her eyes become "vacant."

The fear of the townspeople's and God's judgment keeps those who help Becky secretive about their good deeds. This insight also indicates that there is some belief that God prefers the races to be kept separate, so God, too, has judged Becky for her actions. There is a sense, though, that the townspeople pray to Jesus to save Becky and her two sons. The snippets of prayer used throughout the story reinforce this theme.

As with "November Cotton Flower," the narrator again emphasizes a connection between physical appearance and the true nature of things. Becky's "eyes were sunken, her neck stringy, her breasts fallen..." She is described as if she were a broken structure, something like the crooked chimney that comes to represent her to the townspeople. As well, a road and a rail line physically section off her land, just as Becky is emotionally separated from the townspeople. The final collapse of the chimney appropriately also signals Becky's final collapse under her solitary existence.

This tale also is rich with foreshadowing and a sense of superstition and the supernatural. The rustling of the pines and the pages of the bible indicate a sense of unease, as if to reinforce Becky's state of being: She and her sons, without belonging to a race, are lost and ungrounded. Just as the congregation is leaving the church, the narrator notes that the pines are stale. The horses' nervousness and the narrator's sudden, unexplained fear indicate an otherworldly presence. Perhaps the prayers have been answered, and Jesus has come to save Becky from her physical state.

Chapter 5 "Face"

Chapter 5 "Face" Summary

"Face" is a short poem describing an old woman's face. She has gray hair, a greatly furrowed brow, sad eyes and deep lines. She is presented as the product of a tragic and painful life.

Chapter 5 "Face" Analysis

The narrator's series of snapshots begins to take shape in *Cane* as a sensitive individual's interpretation of life as an African American in Georgia. The combined use of poetry, verse and prose indicate that the narrator is searching for a sincere form of expression or a new way to communicate his culture and lifestyle. As with this poem, the life he has described thus far is bleak, with few instances of hope and beauty. Struggle and tragedy outweigh the bright points. The woman's physical appearance is strikingly altered by the sorrow she has experienced in life. Thematically, this reinforces the idea brought up in earlier chapters that physical appearance can reflect emotional or spiritual health or disease.

Chapter 6 "Cotton Song"

Chapter 6 "Cotton Song" Summary

"Cotton Song" is a work song chanted by field workers bailing cotton. It describes Judgment Day, when people will be set free. The chant also expresses a fear of God and the need to be a good soul before Judgment Day.

Chapter 6 "Cotton Song" Analysis

Thematically, "Cotton Song" expresses a fear of an omnipresent God and his judgment against sinners. The lyrics also associate manual labor (the rolling of cotton) with doing God's will. As it ties into the rest of the novel, "Cotton Song" shows the presence of spirituality even in everyday tasks. Rolling the cotton is likened to saving one's soul, and there is the sense that redemption is associated with the manual labor. As in previous chapters, the emphasis on a fear of the fate of sinners on Judgment Day is present.

Chapter 7 "Carma"

Chapter 7 "Carma" Summary

"Carma" begins with the verse of a short song. The lines tell of cane leaves shifting in the wind, which creates a rustling sound.

The character of Carma, like Becky and Karintha, is described from the narrator's perspective. He sees her driving her mule-drawn wagon home late in the day. A strong black woman, Carma whips her mule as she heads down the dirt road known as Dixie Pike. The narrator watches her as she goes. Carma, possibly feeling his stare, turns to look at him before disappearing down the road.

The next section of the chapter, presented in parentheses, is an insightful setting describing the day as it transitions into night. The sun is a brilliant gold, which makes the pine needles shine brightly; the dry sweet-gum leaves are rustling loudly, and smoke from the sawmill curls into the sky. A girl sings in a yard; a woman dances in the forest, and a dog barks at the moon.

Next, the narrator returns to his commentary on Carma and her tale, which he describes as "the crudest melodrama." The narrator in hindsight describes this melodrama. Carma's husband, Bane, is in the chain gang because of Carma's actions. Bane had been away from home a lot working and Carma, lonely, turned to other lovers. While in town one day, the husband overheard rumors of Carma's infidelities. He confronted her and she denied it. The argument became heated, and Carma left the house with a shotgun in hand. She ran into the cane field. Bane heard the sound of the shotgun blast before he decided to chase after her.

After gathering some of the neighbors to help him, Bane went looking for Carma. They searched for her silently, afraid she might shoot them if they came upon her. She was found listless in the field and carried back to the house. Someone looked her over for a wound, but there wasn't one. Bane suddenly realized that Carma had fooled him with her shotgun blast. He also assumed that this deception proved that she had, indeed, been unfaithful. He lost his temper and knifed one of the men who'd helped find her. As a result, Bane is now in the chain gang.

The story ends with the narrator questioning whether it is wrong for Carma to have a lover.

Chapter 7 "Carma" Analysis

"Carma" shows off the narrator's increasingly complex perspective. First, he is more involved in this tale because he is attracted to Carma. He indicates the attraction by mentioning how his eyes follow her down the road. The telling of Carma's story is, therefore, colored by his feelings for her. He appears to have sympathy for her and does

not blame or judge her for taking lovers outside her marriage. The repeated description of Carma as being as 'strong as a man' indicates the narrator's respect for her independent will.

Carma's strength, however, is quickly overpowered by her husband's words. During the argument, her demeanor changes rapidly into hysteria. When she is found in the cane field, she looks weak and sick, even though she has no injuries.

Interestingly, the narrator also doesn't blame Bane for losing his temper and injuring a man. He acknowledges that Bane's fate came about because of Carma's deceptions. In this perspective, we are all at the mercy of passion and anger.

The setting description presents a snapshot of the complexity of life outside of Carma's troubles. As the sun sets slowly on the town, there are sights, sounds and smells of life. This is contrasted with the cane field at night, which is presented as dark and ominous.

Chapter 8 "Song of the Son"

Chapter 8 "Song of the Son" Summary

"Song of the Son" is a five stanza, rhyming poem. Each stanza has five lines. The poem opens with the mention of a 'parting soul' outside at night in a valley. The landscape is described just before sunset. The narrator also talks of the sun setting on the slaves who frequently used songs as a form of expression. The narrator expresses an interest in remembering and figuratively staying connected with the slaves who had worked the land in previous generations.

Chapter 8 "Song of the Son" Analysis

In Toomer's era, slavery had already been outlawed, but this poem presents the importance and ongoing relevance of the slave experience, particularly to an African American in a farming community. The narrator wishes to keep those memories of his people alive in the form of song. One of *Cane's* recurring themes is the struggle to finding an appropriate language to express the world as the narrator (or perhaps Toomer) sees it. Hence, the book experiments with prose, poetry, verse and hymns. Here, however, the narrator is recognizing the use of song to communicate and keep the past alive.

The opening stanza's direction to sing out into the night is something of a warning to pay homage to previous generations of slaves before they are forgotten. Toomer probably hoped, but didn't expect, that his "Song of the Son" would fulfill its mission of being a timeless reminder of the souls and experiences that came before him and shaped the future of the African American culture.

Chapter 9 "Georgia Dusk"

Chapter 9 "Georgia Dusk" Summary

"Georgia Dusk" is a seven stanza poem that opens with a description of the sky as the sun sets. The imagery moves from the setting sun to the moon overlooking men singing and hounds barking. A sawmill sounds its whistle; the workday ends, and silence falls over the mill. Smoke rises up from the pile of sawdust and filters through the trees. A group of men sing heartily as they walk on the paths through a swamp. The rustling of pine needles in the wind complements the sounds of their voices. In the final stanza, the narrator calls to the singers to preach their Christian beliefs and inspire those around them.

Chapter 9 "Georgia Dusk" Analysis

In "Georgia Dusk," the end of the workday is described as a peaceful time when souls are reignited with faith and optimism. Three aspects are balanced within the poem: human life, nature and Christian faith. The scene is one of renewal. Men, inspired from their souls, sing folk songs. The workday has ended and the sounds of machinery are replaced with sounds of nature. Pollen settles on the land that blooms an early crop. Where trees have been cleared, there is room for new life. The voices of the singers are in harmony with their spirituality and with the natural setting around them. The pine trees, falling needles and swishing cane leaves accompany the song, as if the men are connected with nature. The references to the Christian flavor of the song imply that the men are expressing their spirituality as well.

Chapter 10 "Fern"

Chapter 10 "Fern" Summary

The subject and namesake of "Fern" is a beautiful woman whose gaze is bold. The narrator begins by describing Fern's eyes, which encompass life and all of its experiences. He is in rapture of the shape of her nose, the curvature of her face and her open way of looking directly at people. Men often mistake fern's straightforward gaze; they believe she is willing to give herself to them. When Fern is younger, some men were close to her, but they do not find it enjoyable. Instead, they develop a feeling of obligation to fulfill that unnamable thing Fern searches for with her eyes.

Men continue to come to Fern for physical attention. At some point, she begins to turn them away. These men are left feeling confused and unsure about what she wants or what motivates her. People, men in particular, generally begin to have the impression that Fern is too good for them. Her status in men's eyes is raised to that of an untouchable virgin.

The narrator then discusses how Fern would sit on her porch along the Dixie Pike, with her eyes staring off into the sunset. He describes the power of her stare, which seems to encompass the whole Georgia countryside. A young black man is almost run down in the road because Fern's eyes paralyze him.

The narrator, too, first sees Fern on her porch. He confides that he is from the North and considered to be 'stuck-up' by many of the townspeople. When he asks his companion who the girl on the porch is, the companion only provides her name. Immediately, upon seeing her, the narrator feels compelled to do something for her. He ponders her future as if she were in another place, perhaps in a city married to a successful professional. His thoughts return to what he could do for Fern to make a difference in her life. He then asks the readers to consider his experience as their own and think about what they would do for Fern.

The scene changes, and the narrator is walking up the Pike and stops in to say hello to Fern. He struggles through small talk with her family until he finally has the courage to invite Fern on a walk. They walk together down the Pike, and the townspeople turn and stare at the couple from their porches. It is dusk and the sky glows purple. The narrator comments that he feels unusually perceptive, as if he were on the verge of having a vision. He holds Fern and sees something God-like in her eyes.

Fern suddenly becomes upset and moves away from him. She drops to her knees, and her body shakes as if she were being tortured. She utters strange noises and cries out to Jesus. The narrator goes to her, and she faints in his arms.

The narrator describes how the townsfolk talk of Fern fainting in the cane field. He hears talk that he will be forced to leave town, but nothing comes of it. He acknowledges that

nothing happened between himself and Fern, but he still thinks of her. The story closes with the narrator's implication that he has moved on from that town, but Fern is still there.

Chapter 10 "Fern" Analysis

"Fern," similar to some of the previous chapters, begins as a distanced character sketch from a narrator who seeks to understand his culture, his people and his surroundings. His early description of Fern highlights his inability to express what makes her so alluring. Yes, she is beautiful, but the narrator is more attracted to her complexity than anything else. His repeated mention of her eyes and her gaze indicates that he believes Fern sees and understands more of the world than most. As the narrator describes, Fern's broader perspective leaves the impression on others that she is above them and a creature to be protected. In particular, there is a feeling that the men who misinterpret her must protect Fern.

Perhaps the narrator's strong connection to Fern is rooted in the similarity of his character to hers. Throughout the novel, the narrator has searched for meaning in his surroundings. His perspective, like Fern's, is broad enough that he sees a greater relevance in the characters he describes. Otherwise, there would be no purpose in detailing observations that are the events of everyday life. When he is with Fern in the cane field, he feels close to having a vision. He cites the power of Georgia, dusk and the proximity of Fern as forces that bring him close to achieving some higher level of understanding. The narrator's use of the term "vision" indicates that this level of understanding goes beyond what can be expressed in words.

It is also interesting that the townspeople interpret Fern's complexity differently than they interpret the narrator's complexity. The primary difference between the two of them is gender. Fern, as a woman, is idolized. Men leave Fern feeling as though she is above physicality, almost spiritual in nature. The narrator, in comparison, is thought to be arrogant. By the end of the story, he is even considered a dangerous predator to Fern.

Chapter 11 "Nullo"

Chapter 11 "Nullo" Summary

"Nullo" is a short seven-line poem describing pine needles falling in the forest at sunset. The pine needles fall so quietly from the tree that the rabbits don't hear them touch softly on the ground. The ground is dry and peppered with the imprints of cow hooves.

Chapter 11 "Nullo" Analysis

The pine needles in "Nullo" fall so softly that the animals don't take notice and nothing in the forest is disturbed. There is no indication that the falling pine needles were observed by anything or anyone, other than the narrator. The description prompts one to question the role of perception. In other words, is the meaning of this event defined by how it is perceived? To the rabbits and the forest in general, the falling pine needles are not perceived at all. To them, it is as though the event never happened. The event is only solidified in time and place because the narrator documents it. Essentially, the narrator makes it real by observing it and describing it.

Chapter 12 "Evening Song"

Chapter 12 "Evening Song" Summary

"Evening Song" describes a woman named Cloine in terms of water and moonlight. In the first stanza, her effect on the narrator is compared to a series of natural elements: water, fire and the moon. In the second and third stanzas, the narrator is sleepily watching Cloine, who has already fallen into a slumber.

Chapter 12 "Evening Song" Analysis

Cloine's beauty and allure prompt the narrator to experiment with metaphors of nature to express the effect she has on him. The narrator's repeated use of water and light imagery shows how all-encompassing Cloine's presence is to him. Both water and light have the ability to surround something, either suffocating it or protecting it. While Cloine is still awake, the reference to fire indicates that her power over the narrator is extreme, possibly destructive. As they fall asleep, the imagery becomes more peaceful, yet no less compelling. The description of her, "curled like the sleepy waters where the moonwaves start," ties back to the opening line and indicates how deeply she has affected him. At the end of the poem, he again describes her in terms of light, gleaming and radiant. His description of her is almost God-like, in that her inner light seems to flow over him and run through him.

Chapter 13 "Esther"

Chapter 13 "Esther" Summary

Esther is a pale and serious black girl. She has beautiful features, but lacks an inner glow to light them up. She is generally uninterested in men.

Esther is nine years old when King Barlo falls into a religious trance. Barlo falls to his knees at the Spitoon and is initially ignored by the white men who continue spitting their tobacco juice at him. Looking up at the sky with his lips and nose twitching, Barlo begins to attract attention. The people gather around, realizing that he is in a trance. Several hours pass and the town prepares for Barlo to speak.

At six o'clock, the sun disappears behind a cloud, and Barlo starts to speak. When he describes talking to Jesus, the crowd murmurs in prayer and excitement. Barlo explains, in a broken and distant monologue, that he had a vision about the black man who worshipped the Lord but was enchained in slavery.

As Barlo continues, the narrator documents the impressions of those witnessing the trance. Most are quiet. White people appear to be curiously touched. The preachers, black and white, feel Barlo is stepping into their territory.

Barlo stands and calls upon those around him to accept the Lord into their hearts and lives.

The story then shifts to back to Esther. The incident leaves a lasting impression on her. Years later, she is told that at the end of Barlo's trance, a rumbling voice was heard in the sky and the streets filled with angels and demons, and Barlo left town on the back of a black bull with a golden ring in its nose, and that a man named Limp Underwood, who hated blacks, awoke the next morning hugging a black man. Barlo's trance inspires a woman to paint a black Madonna on the wall of the courthouse.

At sixteen years old, Esther, inspired by the setting sun, begins to daydream that the town is on fire. In the first dream, the fire department rescues a child, and she takes it for her own. She feels guilty because she cannot explain how she came to have the child. In another dream, the fire blazes out of control as men spit tobacco juice upon it. Women hold up their skirts and show their underwear. Esther again takes the baby in her arms and loves it as her own.

At twenty-two years old, Esther is working in her father's store. Her life consists of exchanging pleasantries with customers. She has no boyfriend and men generally ignore her. She begins to daydream about Barlo, exaggerating his appearance and importance to make her memories of him more exciting. Based on her exaggerated imagination, she decides that she is in love with Barlo.

When Esther is twenty-seven, she has withdrawn from the world around her. She pays little attention to the customers she serves in the store. Physically, she is tired and thin. She hears someone shout outside that Barlo has returned to town as a rich man. Her old daydreams about Barlo return, even though she tries to resist them. Esther resolves to act on her newly-revived feelings for Barlo.

At midnight, she sneaks out of her home and walks into town with purpose. She goes to Nat Bowle's place, presumably a saloon and approaches Barlo. He asks her why she is there, and Esther responds that she is there for him. An awkward, broken conversation ensues, and Barlo slowly understands that Esther is professing her love for him. He smiles at her, and she is hit with the realization that he is drunk and physically unattractive. She runs outside.

Chapter 13 "Esther" Analysis

The Barlo incident is the most powerful and memorable event of Esther's young life. His trance takes on supernatural proportions as the townspeople talk of angels and demons and voices from the sky. Esther internalizes all of these images as a young girl. When she moves through adolescence and into adulthood, the vision of Barlo professing Jesus' words remains with her constantly. With nothing else in her life as powerful, the Barlo trance and Barlo as a man become very central to Esther's psyche.

Esther's dreams of fire represent the awakening of her passion. The image is associated with her memory of Barlo, as she imagines men spitting their tobacco juice upon it. She also dreams of having a baby she can care for, indicating that Esther essentially feels isolated. She has nothing to keep her grounded in life, and yearns for a personal connection. This feeling of emptiness and boredom later reignites her memories of Barlo. These memories take on a life of their own. Esther's impression of Barlo is exaggerated to the point of being unrealistic.

Esther, unfortunately, chooses a course of action based on this unrealistic perception, because it is the only reality she knows. Her decision to approach Barlo seems entirely natural to her. To those who witness Esther's pursuit of Barlo, her actions are ridiculous and out of place.

Esther's reality is quickly shattered by Barlo's hideous smile. The narrator describes how her surroundings seemingly disappear around her. This figurative disappearance of the town indicates how deeply Esther had internalized this God-like vision of Barlo. Seemingly, her understanding of the world around her is based on her understanding of the mythical vision of Barlo. Once this vision of Barlo is broken, she can no longer relate to anything else around her. The reality that she perceives, therefore, falls away.

Chapter 14 "Conversion"

Chapter 14 "Conversion" Summary

"Conversion" is about religious conversion from traditional African beliefs to Christianity. The African "Guardian of Souls" is characterized as drunk and hungry, basically succumbing to base, physical needs. This African God falls to the ways of a new Christian God, who is cynical and white. There are shouts of amen and hosanna.

Chapter 14 "Conversion" Analysis

The roles of religion and nature within the African American culture are prominent themes throughout *Cane*. Here, the narrator compares a traditional African god with the Christian god. Despite the depth to which religion influences the lives of the characters in the novel, neither god in "Conversion" is without its flaws. The African god is excessive with food and drink. While Christianity is the accepted replacement to the drunk African guardian, the narrator indicates that the Christian god is not really appropriate either. He is white and bitter, and his words ("palabra") are weak.

Chapter 15 "Portrait in Georgia"

Chapter 15 "Portrait in Georgia" Summary

"Conversion" is followed by another short poem, "Portrait in Georgia." "Portrait" describes a slim, pale woman with long, braided hair. Her eyes are compared to branches and her lips to scars and blisters.

Chapter 15 "Portrait in Georgia" Analysis

Georgia and its cane fields are wrapped up in this woman's physical burnout. The use of Georgia in the title indicates that this woman is typical of the Georgia, cane-farming experience. Her portrait is brutally realistic. The narrator touches on images of death, violence and signs of physical pain by comparing the woman's features to scars, blisters and a "lyncher's rope." The comparison of her breath to the cane's final sweet odor implies that the woman is aging and will shortly be beyond her prime. Lastly, the color of her skin is compared to burned, black flesh. With this final image, the poem ends abruptly.

"Portrait in Georgia" is a departure from previous chapters in which the narrator adores female beauty. The narrator expresses woman's allure by comparing the characters in "Karintha," "Fern," and "Evening Song," to different aspects of nature. These aspects include sunsets, moonlight, water, the countryside, etc. In "Portrait," the elements of nature are used in the opposite fashion - to paint a distinctly stark portrait of a woman.

Chapter 16 "Blood-Burning Moon"

Chapter 16 "Blood-Burning Moon" Summary

"Blood-Burning Moon" describes the violent outcome of an interracial love triangle. The story is set at night under a full moon. Louisa, a young black girl, is on her way home from the Stone's home, where she works in the kitchen. She sings quietly as she walks and thinks of Bob Stone, the son of her employer. Bob Stone loves Louisa and Louisa is also fond of Bob.

Tom Burwell is in love with Louisa as well. Tom is a black field worker who tries to court Louisa at night when he has time after work. Called Big Boy, Tom is physically strong and emotionally rugged. To Louisa, Tom's brute strength is attractive, particularly when she thinks of Tom in comparison to Bob Stone.

As she walks home, she considers Tom and Bob together. She thinks about a planned meeting with Bob to take place later that evening in the canebrake. As for Tom, she expects that he will propose to her soon, but her plan is to put him off indefinitely. She begins to feel inexplicably restless thinking about the two men who love her. As she walks, dogs and roosters begin to bark and crow loudly.

The scene shifts to a black man feeding cane into a mule-powered grinder. He whips at the mule while a boy transfers the ground cane juice to the boiling stove. The smell of boiling cane fills the air. Men are seated around the stove. Old David Georgia stirs the thickening cane syrup on the stove and tells stories. Tom Burwell is among the group of men who are entertained by these tales. Someone mentions Louisa and implies that she is in a relationship with Bob Stone. Tom becomes angry and argues that Louisa is his girl. Will Manning laughs and Tom punches him. Tom pulls out a knife to fight, but the men run away.

Tom, angry, heads to the factory town. As he's walking, he hears the dogs and roosters making noise. He sees the full moon and feels a chill. He heads to Louisa's home and finds her in front of the house. They begin a short conversation, and Tom attempts to express his feelings to Louisa. He asks her if Bob Stone means anything to her, and she avoids answering him directly. He threatens to cut Bob if he is pursuing Louisa. They fall quiet and Louisa begins to sing. Tom holds her, and women nearby join their song.

The scene switches to Bob Stone walking through the forest. He is questioning whether his family will accept his love for Louisa. He is uncertain about why his feelings for her are so strong. His thoughts move through his lack of understanding of blacks to his fear of Tom Burwell. He considers how ridiculous it would be for him to get into a fight with Tom over Louisa. Bob then walks upon the men in the clearing by the stove and overhears them talking about him and Tom Burwell. He becomes angry and scared and runs into the cane field, where he is whipped and cut by cane stalks.

Bob goes looking for Louisa, but she isn't at their meeting place. He realizes she must be with Tom. He rushes to her home and finds them together. A fight ensues and Tom slashes Bob's throat. Bob limps away and implicates Tom before he passes out.

A white mob gathers and goes after Tom to punish him for the murder. He is bound and thrown onto a blazing fire, where he dies slowly and painfully in front of the angry mob.

Louisa, meanwhile, is at home in denial of the whole experience. She begins to sing, hoping Tom will come by to see her.

Chapter 16 "Blood-Burning Moon" Analysis

The foreshadowing in "Blood-Burning Moon" is powerful. An ominous, full moon sets the scene for what follows. Louisa, Tom and Bob each feel a strange sense of nervousness. None of these three characters know the origin of this nervous feeling. Even the animals sense something in the air; both Tom and Louisa hear the roosters crowing and dogs barking as they think about each other. The thick scent of cane in the air adds another dimension of eeriness to the scene.

Later, Tom and Louisa enjoy a brief moment of peace just before the plot takes a tragic turn. Tom is finally able to communicate his love for her. He talks of their future, trying to show her how he could take care of her. She does not deny him his vision of the future. Instead, Louisa denies knowing about Bob Stone's love for her. In doing so, Tom and Louisa bond around a dream of a peaceful future together. They then share a song with each other and with their neighbors.

The image of the couple and their neighbors sharing a song would have typically been an optimistic scene. There is a contrast, however, between this image and the actual words of the verse they are singing. The verse, referencing the 'blood-burning' moon is as ominous as the full moon and the barking dogs. The contrast indicates that any sense of peace Tom and Louisa share at this moment is purely temporary. Their dream of the future is just a dream.

Also notable is the contrast between how Tom and Bob each deal with their love for Louisa. Tom has little time to spend with her because he must work. He is also limited in his ability to communicate how he feels. He is quick-tempered and prone to violence, but he addresses Louisa with an awkward gentleness.

Bob Stone, on the other hand, is conflicted by his race and his place in society relative to Louisa's. He has strong feelings for her, but he doesn't understand them. He is embarrassed when he thinks of how his family might judge his feelings for Louisa. In his mind, he is the master and Louisa is the servant. He can't seem to understand his feelings for her outside of this social hierarchy. That is why he imagines going to her and taking her boldly, "as a master should."

As both men learn, their race and social status place limits on their actions. Bob should not love Louisa. Tom cannot defend his love for Louisa when her other suitor is a white man. When Tom and Bob go against these boundaries, the results are disastrous.

Chapter 17 "Seventh Street"

Chapter 17 "Seventh Street" Summary

"Seventh Street" is a short sketch of a Washington, D.C. neighborhood. The environment is characterized by drinking, gambling and jazz music. Seventh Street is predominantly a black hangout. The narrator describes it as where the bootleggers rule and money is spent on all types of forbidden behavior.

Chapter 17 "Seventh Street" Analysis

"Seventh Street" marks the beginning of the second section of the book. The setting switches away from the cane fields of Georgia and to the urban environment of Washington, D.C. Washington, D.C. itself is described as primarily white. Seventh Street is contrasted with this; the street is characterized as a rotting, black spot in the structure of the entire city.

The narrator notes some influencing factors behind the excessive behavior described on Seventh Street. First, there is money. The poem, which opens and closes the story, indicates that having money in one's pocket is a temptation. Also, the reference to bootleggers implies that money and success are more easily gained by illegal behavior.

The narrator also references Prohibition and the War. Prohibition was in force at the time Toomer published *Cane.* World War I had just ended. These factors hang heavily in the backdrop of "Seventh Street," as they did in American society.

Chapter 18 "Rhobert"

Chapter 18 "Rhobert" Summary

"Rhobert" is a character sketch of a man who is sinking into a life of sin. He is described as an upright man who had rickets as a child. His legs are wobbly. He does not care that he is wasting his life. He does not care about his wife and children. He knows only that he is sinking. Once Rhobert's fate is sealed, the community, helpless, watches him go down.

Chapter 18 "Rhobert" Analysis

The language of the story is rich and poetic. The narrator relies on metaphor to describe Rhobert's fate. Rhobert himself seemingly cannot change this fate nor can those around him, who see his life wasting away in sinful behavior.

The narrator references a house Rhobert wears on his head and Rhobert's wobbly legs. These are figurative descriptions of Rhobert's environment and his moral structure. The house that crushes Rhobert's head is the city around him that presents all different types of temptation. This can be viewed as a parallel to the previous chapter's "Seventh Street," a haven of temptation. Although Rhobert is essentially a good man, he is weak in the face of temptation.

Rhobert's weakness will be the cause of his demise. He rationalizes that he is enjoying a world that God has created. Robert knows that his time is limited and that he will eventually die from his excessive behavior. The image of Rhobert thrashing happily in the mud that is consuming him indicates he doesn't have the strength or the desire to avoid his fate.

The story ends with the community singing to Rhobert as he dies. The singing neighbors apparently have no means of helping Rhobert. They can only watch and honor him after he has gone.

The city life described here and in "Seventh Street" sharply contrasts to the descriptions of life near the cane fields of Georgia. The narrator's depiction of life in the countryside, though difficult, does have moments of spiritual renewal. The city depicted in "Seventh Street" and "Rhobert" is little more than a den of temptation.

Chapter 19 "Avey"

Chapter 19 "Avey" Summary

"Avey" begins with a schoolboy talking, in the first person, about the first time he decides he loves a girl named Avey. He and a group of friends are sitting outside an apartment house at night, waiting for Avey to come outside. She is visiting with a man. While she is inside, the boys talk about how they want to beat up the man in the apartment.

Later, the boys discuss how Avey can get away with these visits to her boyfriend. One of the boys shares a rumor that Avey's mom knows what is going on. As a result, Avey is going to marry the man in the apartment. The boys argue about this briefly, but all agree that Avey will be forced to marry someone soon.

The narrator describes his various attempts to get Avey's attention. He helps her learn to swim; he dances with her, but he still can't get emotionally close to her. The boyfriend in the apartment is away working somewhere for a year. Meanwhile, Avey goes with Ned until he has no more money to treat her. She leaves Ned and goes with another boy until his money runs out also. She repeats the pattern several times.

One night, the narrator is finally alone with Avey in a lifeboat on the Potomac River. She begins to show him affection, but he realizes that her affection has no passion in it. He kisses her once. Avey holds him and sings to him as if he were a child. Although the narrator would prefer a more passionate exchange, he gives up and lets Avey show her tender affection.

The following summer, the narrator again spends time alone with Avey. They sit together on a rock above Harpers Ferry, holding hands. He wants to communicate his love for her, but she is content to sit quietly with him. He kisses and touches her, but she remains distant. He and Avey spend repeated evenings in a similar fashion. The narrator tries to talk to her about the college boy she used to spend her time with, but Avey will not discuss it.

The narrator is concerned that the time he spends with her might damage her reputation. Avey does not care. He begins to think she is lazy. This assessment slowly turns to resentment. The narrator goes to college and resolves to forget about her.

Two years pass and the narrator unexpectedly receives a note from Avey. She says she is going away. He returns to Washington, D.C. and finds that the community has forgotten about her. He makes contact with Ned, who characterizes Avey as a whore.

Five years go by, and the narrator is aged by life and work. He begins to think of Avey once again and longs to see her. Hearing a rumor that she is in New York, he hitchhikes his way there to look for her. He finds work in the shipyards and wanders the streets

nightly, looking for her. He sees her one night on the arm of a man; Avey is not surprised to see the narrator.

Avey parts with her companion and walks with the narrator. The narrator guesses by the man's behavior and Avey's dress and attitude that she is a prostitute. The narrator takes Avey to a spot in Soldier's Home where they can sit quietly and talk. He makes polite conversation with a policeman on duty, so that he and Avey won't be bothered. The narrator talks to Avey about his needs and her needs, trying to woo her with beautiful words and visions of the future. Avey does not respond. The narrator's thoughts turn to physical desire. He turns to her and realizes that she is asleep and his passion evaporates. He sits still for a while and then tries unsuccessfully to wake her. He borrows a blanket and watches Avey sleep until dawn.

Chapter 19 "Avey" Analysis

"Avey" traces the development of a boyhood crush that takes on a life of its own. The narrator continues to have feelings for Avey, even though he has little in common with her. He does not respect her, and, at times, he even resents her. She has no initiative and no plans for the future. The narrator, in contrast, must finish his schooling and work for a living. Avey manages to get by on her beauty. By the time the narrator finds her in New York, she is a well-dressed prostitute.

Avey demonstrates tenderness towards the narrator, but she is without passion. When he is younger, the narrator feels a strong physical attraction to Avey. He is frustrated, however, with her emotional distance. During the evenings they spend alone at Harpers Ferry, Avey lets him touch her, but he doesn't feel that he's ignited any fire within her.

Roughly the same pattern of behavior is repeated in New York when both characters are older. At this point, the narrator and Avey seem to have been changed somewhat by the realities of life in the city. Rather than express his feelings through passionate kisses - as he had tried to do previously - the narrator uses words to try and reach Avey on a deeper level. In the earlier years, Avey responded to the narrator's efforts with friendly affection. Older now, she simply falls asleep. In both scenarios, the narrator is unable to reach her at any meaningful, emotional level.

The narrator's actions while he is away from Avey indicate that his loyal love for her has little to do with Avey personally. He does not try to find her until he is in need of a change in life. When he does find her, he does not seem surprised or angry about her occupation. He tries to talk to her about emotions and a promising future for women, even though her past history has proven her to be shallow and lazy. She falls asleep as he talks, showing that she has no interest in his tender speech. The story ends with the narrator sitting next to her. He is lost in his own thoughts, and she is sound asleep. They are physically together but emotionally separate once again.

Chapter 20 "Beehive"

Chapter 20 "Beehive" Summary

"Beehive" is a poem describing a swarming beehive. It is written from the perspective of a male drone bee inside the hive. The male bee watches a million other bees fly in and out of the hive at night. He stays within the hive licking honey but wishes he could go outside and experience the countryside at night.

Chapter 20 "Beehive" Analysis

"Beehive" is not a straightforward poem. The literal description of the swarming bees may have many different figurative interpretations. The activity of the bees, the reference to a far-off farmyard and the poem's placement with *Cane* are clues to the poem's deeper meaning. From Chapter 17 ("Seventh Street") forward, the book's setting has been in the city. Toomer's perspectives on the city have included references to temptation, sinful behavior and a lack of meaningful human interaction. In this context, the beehive seems to represent the city, filled with people, activity and temptation. The bees, buzzing and honey represent these respectively. The narrator further specifies that the hive is black, implying that the setting is a black neighborhood within the city. The image of moonlight, used frequently in earlier chapters, returns here as a backdrop to the hive. The drone bee is trapped within the hive, drunk on honey. He longs, however, to escape to the countryside, out of the moonlight's compelling hold.

Chapter 21 "Storm Ending"

Chapter 21 "Storm Ending" Summary

The poem "Storm Ending" talks of the thunder, wind, rain and sudden sunshine at the end of a storm. The first half of "Storm Ending" describes thunder using various aspects of a flower. The second half of the poem describes rain clouds that are pierced by sunshine and "bleeding rain."

Chapter 21 "Storm Ending" Analysis

"Storm Ending" is another example of Toomer's use of nature imagery to create a powerful scene. The narrator paints a picture of a loud and imposing storm using the unlikely descriptor of a flower. The thunder "blossoms gorgeously" and the clouds are "full-lipped flowers." The rain is described in terms of both blood and honey, dripping from the sky. Overall, the scene links both beauty and destruction with the very powerful forces of nature.

Chapter 22 "Theater"

Chapter 22 "Theater" Summary

The Howard Theater is located in a black neighborhood within the city, surrounded by pool halls, saloons and cabarets. The streets come alive at night, when people head out looking for a good time. John is the theater manager's brother. He is seated in the theater just before rehearsal. It is late in the day, and a shaft of orange light hits his face from a window above. John is deep in thought. He senses the dancers on stage and is moved by the music. He considers the dancers individually and wonders about their backgrounds.

The pianist begins to play jazz, and the dancers respond. All of them are improvising and having fun. John thinks about how the director will place these dancers within a stale, choreographed show. The girls on stage continue their free dancing. John watches and thinks passionately about the dancers.

The director calls the girls to attention and begins the rehearsal. As John watches, one dancer, Dorris, has more life in her step than the others. John is attracted to her. Dorris feels that John is watching her and asks another dancer who he is. The other dancer warns Dorris that he's the manager's brother. Dorris considers the warning and questions why John should be off limits. The director scolds the girls and provides some direction on their dance number. The director soon senses Dorris' energy and decides to let her dance.

Dorris, inspired by John in the audience, creates her own dance. The other girls absorb her energy and begin to move in their own steps as well. The director, impressed, forgets to correct the girls for ignoring their choreographed steps.

Dorris, while dancing, thinks of John and the potential for a future with him. She feels she can communicate with him through her dancing. John watches and feels close to her. His mind wanders and he daydreams about being alone with her while she dances for him.

The music ends suddenly and Dorris looks to John's face, hoping her dancing has touched him. She sees him with a distant look in his eyes and realizes he has been daydreaming. Her feelings are hurt, and she runs from the stage crying. The story ends with the other dancer comforting Dorris and repeating her earlier warning about John.

Chapter 22 "Theater" Analysis

Like "Avey," this story emphasizes how difficult it can be for two people to interact on a meaningful, emotional level. Dorris and John are strangers. They feel an attraction for one another. Each character, however, has a different expectation of the outcome of that attraction. This ultimately results in disappointment for Dorris.

As the scene unfolds, the narrative goes back and forth between the two characters' thoughts. Dorris feels John looking at her and begins to imagine where a relationship with him might lead. She wants to be seen as an individual, worthy of attention. In contrast, John is attracted to Dorris, but has no thoughts of a relationship. He merely dreams of her dancing for him in a detached way. To John, Dorris is nothing more than a faceless muse. Dorris feels robbed of her efforts because John's attention was the inspiration for her non-choreographed performance. She threw herself into the dance as a way to speak to him. When she was finished, she realized that he wasn't really listening after all.

Another theme that appears in the story is the limitations of class structure. Dorris is reminded that John, as the manager's brother, is in a position of power. When John first sees Dorris, he reminds himself that she is just a dancer and, therefore, not available to him.

Chapter 23 "Her Lips Are Copper Wire"

Chapter 23 "Her Lips Are Copper Wire" Summary

"Her Lips Are Copper Wire" is a five-stanza poem describing the attraction the narrator feels for a woman. The poem follows a metaphor of the woman's kiss as electric energy. Imagery used includes the glow of lampposts, the city's power grid, and flashing, lighted billboards.

Chapter 23 "Her Lips Are Copper Wire" Analysis

"Her Lips" is an example of Toomer's distinctive and versatile perspective on the world around him. While he uses natural imagery liberally throughout *Cane*, this poem relies on man-made technology to make its point. The woman in the poem clearly has power and influence over the narrator. To continue the metaphor, her touch and her kiss are electric. His attraction for her is something hot and glowing against the dreary backdrop of the foggy city at night. Her lips, as copper wire, conduct her energy to him.

Chapter 24 "Calling Jesus"

Chapter 24 "Calling Jesus" Summary

"Calling Jesus" compares a woman's faith-starved soul to a whimpering, neglected puppy. The woman closes the door on the puppy each night. Jesus watches over the puppy and brings it to the woman each night as she sleeps. In the daytime, the narrator senses that this "puppy" follows the woman, whimpering and calling for attention.

Chapter 24 "Calling Jesus" Analysis

The woman of "Calling Jesus" is not nurturing her own soul with any kind of religious faith. The narrator can clearly sense that the woman is spiritually lacking and pities her. He believes that Jesus watches over this woman and quietly cares for that part of her that yearns for religious faith. Jesus patiently waits for the woman to accept Him into her heart. During the daytime, the woman continues to ignore her spiritual needs. At night, Jesus cares for that empty part of the woman as she sleeps.

Images of the city and the country are present in this short story. At night, the woman closes a storm door and dreams of hay and cane. Her breath is compared to flowers, and her eyes remind the narrator of an open landscape. The daytime setting, however, includes references to streets, alleys and dusty asphalt.

Chapter 25 "Box Seat"

Chapter 25 "Box Seat" Summary

"Box Seat" begins with Dan Moore walking down the street. While walking, he sings and daydreams of the girl he is going to see. He arrives at the house, walks up the steps and looks for the doorbell. He doesn't see it immediately and briefly considers breaking in. Instead, he knocks.

After several knocks, Mrs. Pribby opens the door and lets him in. She announces to Muriel that Dan has arrived to see her. Dan's thoughts reveal he doesn't like Mrs. Pribby, who walks to the back of the house and begins reading the newspaper. Dan thinks of Muriel and wonders if she is changing in the bathroom. He hears a car drive by on the street outside.

Muriel comes into the room and addresses Dan. They shake hands and exchange small talk. Dan's feelings for Muriel make him nervous. He expresses an understanding that Muriel has been through some difficult times recently, and he tries to be supportive of her. She prefers to keep the conversation light and tries to change the subject. She tells him she is going to a show that night with her friend, Bernice. Mrs. Pribby makes her presence known in the back room by rustling the newspaper.

Muriel considers Dan and his love for her. She admits to herself that she could love him, but there are other factors involved that make it difficult for them to have a relationship. They continue to talk, and Muriel advises Dan to get a job and settle down. He becomes angry and they argue lightly. Each tries to lecture the other on happiness and life. Dan goes to her and drops to one knee. She protests and tells him to get up, fearful that Mrs. Pribby will walk in and observe their exchange. When Muriel tries to pull away from him, Dan professes his love.

From the other room, Mrs. Pribby raps her newspaper loudly. The clock strikes eight and Muriel and Dan separate. She begins to move away, expecting Bernice to arrive shortly. Dan tries again to move towards Muriel, but Mrs. Pribby approaches. He leaves the house quickly.

The scene shifts to the theater, as guests fill their seats. Muriel and Bernice sit together. Muriel is distracted with thoughts of Dan; she is upset and resolves not to see him again. To Muriel's surprise, Dan comes into the theater and sits down. As the show proceeds, the narrative moves back and forth between Dan's thoughts and Muriel's thoughts. Both are angry. Dan, in his nervousness, upsets the people sitting near him. They ask him to be quiet.

Dan's thoughts are framed by the showing going on in the stage. There is dancing, fighting and women talking about feminism. The latter Dan thinks is ridiculous. A stage

fight brings the audience into a rowdy mood. The fight's victor, Mr. Barry, is announced again on stage. He begins to sing love songs to women in the audience.

Dan is disoriented by the light and noise in the theater. He realizes that Mr. Barry is singing to Muriel. Muriel looks uncomfortable, as if she is trapped in her chair. Mr. Barry offers her a rose, which Muriel reluctantly accepts. Dan is outraged and screams out in the theater. He picks a fight with an unnamed man in the theater and together they head outside to finish the conflict. The theater audience follows them. As the man takes off his hat, Dan has already forgotten the incident and continues walking down the street.

Chapter 25 "Box Seat" Analysis

In "Box Seat," Dan and Muriel are kept apart by class restrictions. Dan is an unemployed man in the city who is in love with Muriel. Muriel seemingly once had feelings for Dan, but now finds herself in a place that does not approve of the relationship. Clearly, Muriel has moved above Dan in status. Dan indicates his awareness of this fact when he fears that he might be viewed as a criminal in Muriel's neighborhood. To Dan, these intangible restrictions are embodied in the gated homes of the neighborhood and in Mrs. Pribby herself.

The narrator relies on images of confinement throughout the story to emphasize this theme. All the homes have gates. The metallic click of Mrs. Pribby's chair sounds like a deadbolt. Dan imagines all of the homes on the street as being locked around Mrs. Pribby and other homeowners like her. When Dan reaches for Muriel, his arms are described as bars. Mrs. Pribby's rustling of the newspaper acts as a glass wall, keeping Dan on one side and Muriel on the other.

Once the scene moves to the theater, all of the characters are locked into their relative places by the seating arrangement. Muriel and Bernice are with their friends. Unfamiliar faces surround Dan. This scene aptly characterizes their relationship; Dan is on the outside of Muriel's world, looking in.

Later, Muriel is trapped under the attention of the dwarf, Mr. Barry. He disgusts her, but the audience forces her to take his flower. The applause of the audience is described as shackles, compelling Muriel to accept the dwarf.

Another notable aspect of the story is Dan's view of himself as some kind of savior. In several cases, he directly refers to himself as Jesus. Repeatedly, he has thoughts of breaking things, an indication that he wants to tear down the restraints that society has placed on him. He seems to believe that destruction, of the theater and of Mrs. Pribby's home, can lead to a greater freedom.

Chapter 26 "Prayer"

Chapter 26 "Prayer" Summary

"Prayer" is a poem discussing the conflicting needs of the soul, body and mind. The narrator places himself within a larger body of Spirits. Within this context, his soul is just one member. He has given too much of his body but not enough of his soul. He calls on the Spirits to help him.

Chapter 26 "Prayer" Analysis

"Prayer" is organized thematically around the conflict between spiritual needs and physical needs. He is pulled in one direction by the physical needs of his body and in another direction by the spiritual needs of his soul. He discusses his inability to define clearly and consistently what type of nourishment his soul requires. His body's physical needs, in comparison, are more direct and more easily satisfied.

The use of the contradictory statements adds to the complexity of the narrator's self-assessment. He is both weak and strong. He gives too much and not enough. He calls to the Spirits, but then questions the whether his voice, a physical attribute, will reach them. The only thing the narrator is sure of is that he does not fully understand his own soul.

Chapter 27 "Harvest Song"

Chapter 27 "Harvest Song" Summary

"Harvest Song" is told in the first person. The narrator is a reaper in the field, who is hungry and tired at the day's end. His throat is dry and his face covered with dust. The dust in his eyes makes him unable to see other reapers in the field. He longs to see others like him. He is afraid to call out to his fellow workers because he does not want them to offer him their harvest. He does not want to awaken his hunger. The reaper's ears are also filled with dust, and he cannot hear. He wants to hear other reapers singing in the fields. He acknowledges his hunger and thirst again. The reaper has cradled his oats, but has not yet bound them.

The song ends with the reaper beating his hands against his pile of oats, preferring the pain against his hands to feeling the full impact of his hunger.

Chapter 27 "Harvest Song" Analysis

The reaper's sense of isolation in the field is at the forefront of the poem. He wants to see and hear his fellow workers around him, but his senses are dulled by the long day's work. Hungry, tired and covered with dust, he cannot see, taste or hear anything. Without the perception of those around him, he is essentially alone. At the poem's end, his isolation prompts him to imagine calling out to the other workers as his brothers. The imagined bond continues as he beats his hands on the oats and instructs them to do the same.

The narrator's dulled senses do not, however, keep him from the pangs of hunger and thirst. He acknowledges his hunger several times in the poem, but admits a fear of "knowing" his hunger. This apparent contradiction indicates that the narrator's denial is how he chooses to deal with his consuming hunger.

Chapter 28 "Bona and Paul"

Chapter 28 "Bona and Paul" Summary

"Bona and Paul" begins in a high school gymnasium. Bona sits in a corner watching the students performing their drills. She does not participate because she has told the director that she is ill. She watches one boy intently and debates with herself about whether she loves him.

The young men and women on the gym floor begin to choose sides for a boys-versus-girls basketball game. Bona goes to Helen, the girls' captain, and demands to play. The team has already been chosen, so a brief argument ensues. The gym director overhears and steps in to solve the problem. The director is confused, because Bona had already said she was sick. They exchange words and Bona looks to her friend, Helen, for help. Helen lets Bona join the team and another girl drops out.

Bona jumps against Paul to start the game. He outplays her and she struggles to guard him. The play continues with Bona fighting against Paul, until he accidentally hits her in the jaw with his elbow. She falls and he catches her. Bona quickly becomes angry, and Paul feels a sudden, unexpected passion. This gives way to a feeling that he is being suffocated. He imagines that he was the one who was hit and becomes dizzy. Bona pulls herself away from him and runs down the hall.

The scene shifts to Paul standing in front of two windows. He is looking outside at the sun and imagines the Georgia countryside. (He is in Chicago.) Paul's roommate, Art, comes in and tells Paul that he has a date set up for him. Paul reluctantly goes to dinner with Art. After they order, Art tells Paul that he's arranged for him to go on a date with Bona.

Later, Art and Paul are dressed up for an evening out. Paul is calm and detached; Art is upbeat and cheery. Art sits at a piano and plays jazz enthusiastically. Helen and Bona arrive and pair off with Art and Paul.

The foursome heads outside. Bona asks Paul to tell her something about himself. He compliments her on her beauty, and she expresses her desire to know more about him, to be closer to him emotionally. She tells him that she loves him. Paul will not talk of love but wants to kiss her. At first, Bona is agreeable, but changes her mind when she remembers that he would not say that he loves her. She walks away from him and catches up to Art and Helen.

The group arrives at the destination, a lively theater house called the Crimson Gardens. People stare at Paul, wondering what his ethnicity is. Paul feels their stares and realizes he is different from them. This realization gives Paul a sense of his own identity and a sense of strength.

Art wonders what is bothering Paul. He thinks about Paul's complex and quiet nature. Drinks arrive and the stage show begins. Paul is lost in thoughts about his newfound sense of identity. He looks at Bona and admits to himself that he'd like to know her, to love her. He promises her that she'll know more about him before the end of their evening. The show continues.

Helen thinks of her relationship with Art, how she wishes Art would spend more time with her and less time with Paul. She believes Bona doesn't love Paul, but that she is fascinated by him as other girls are. Helen admits that she is also fascinated with Paul. Bona questions whether Paul likes her.

The couples move to the dance floor. Paul is quickly bored with Bona and thinks of dancing with Helen instead. Bona senses his distraction and provokes him to a petty disagreement. They exchange words and Bona tries to pull away. Paul pulls her back to him. When people around them begin to stare, they stop struggling. Looking at each other, their anger turns to passion. Bona and Paul head for the exit, feeling out of place in the crowd.

As they leave, the man at the door gives Paul a knowing look. Out on the street, Paul leaves Bona briefly and returns to the doorman. He tells the doorman that he is wrong for thinking that Paul and Bona were leaving together for a meaningful physical encounter. He eloquently expresses his desire to know Bona and his optimism that something special was about to happen between them.

Paul shakes the man's hand and returns for Bona. When he gets to the place where he had left her, she has gone.

Chapter 28 "Bona and Paul" Analysis

"Bona and Paul" is an exploration of the interaction of four college students in Chicago. Paul is a moody, quiet, dark-skinned young man whose ethnicity is unclear. He is thought to be black. To women who know him, he is attractive and fascinating. To strangers, he is a mystery. Bona is white-skinned and shallow. She pursues Paul as a challenge.

The main events of the story are expressed in terms of color: Paul's red-brown face, Art's blond hair, Bona's pale face and black hair and Helen's yellow hair are all important descriptors of these characters. A crimson blush on her face shows Bona's wild emotions vividly. The moment of Paul's sudden, self-understanding occurs under the white and pink lights in the Crimson Gardens. Paul is then drawn to the idea that a broader view of the Crimson Gardens would show the scene washed in purple. This vision is so interesting to him that he almost gets up from the table and walks away without explanation.

Later, when Paul and Bona are leaving, he believes he sees the Gardens from this far-away perspective. As he had expected earlier, in this broader vision, the Gardens are purple. Paul's vision of purple, however, is disrupted by one spot of black. That spot

represents the doorman, who believes that Paul and Bona are leaving for a cheap, sexual encounter. Paul's desire to erase that spot of black causes him to leave Bona on the corner and explain himself. He clearly describes his vision to the man. His description represents Paul's understanding of beauty. He sees color, emotion and life coming together to create something new, something beautiful. This unity, to Paul, is represented by the color purple. His speech is punctuated with him shaking hands with the black doorman, a sign of unity between colors and races.

Bona's disappearance points out the idealism in Paul's final speech. He had been sure that some great moment of human connection was about to happen. Bona, unfortunately, does not have the broad and poetic vision of Paul. She, from the start of the story, is shallow and manipulative. She claims to want to know Paul, but when she is given the opportunity to do so, she takes off.

Chapter 29 "Kabnis"

Chapter 29 "Kabnis" Summary

Ralph Kabnis sits in his bed, trying to read himself to sleep. He hears Georgia's night winds speaking to him. Kabnis has thin hair, a mustache and brown eyes. He believes his appearance makes him seem weak to others. He ponders how having a strong body would have made his life different. He slides beneath his bed covers.

A rat runs across the boards of the ceiling. Kabnis, pulling his head out from the covers, feels dust fall on him. He has a growing sense that something is about to happen. A hen makes noise in the next room, and he throws a slipper and yells at it. Still angry, he yells more and gets out of bed. He grabs the chicken, breaks its neck, throws its head away and hides its body.

He feels remorse about his state in the world. Inspired to curse at the heavens, Kabnis looks up and is suddenly speechless. He drops to his knees and begs God and Jesus not to torment him with the beauty of nature. He is quickly disgusted with himself. Kabnis' thoughts return to everything he dislikes: primarily God and Hanby, the principal of the school were Kabnis works.

Kabnis' eyes move over the countryside, and he thinks of the courthouse tower. He envisions white men deciding on justice and a black man's future, possibly his own. He thinks of the city, Washington, D.C. first and then New York. He misses the city. Kabnis returns to his room and starts a fire. He wants a cigarette or some "licker," but he knows he isn't allowed to drink or smoke on school property.

Ralph hears a scratching noise outside. Paranoid, he puts out his fire and picks up his poker. When he opens the door, he scares away a calf carrying a yoke. He thinks of going to see Halsey and Layman the next day. He believes he's losing his mind because he doesn't have any one to whom he can talk. Finally able to silence his thoughts, Kabnis goes to sleep.

The scene moves to Fred Halsey's shabby parlor. A set of family portraits on the wall indicate that Fred is of mixed race, black and white. Blacks are seen outside on their way to afternoon church service as a flock of buzzards fly overhead.

Halsey comes into the room, followed by Professor Layman. Layman is a black man from Georgia, who is both a teacher and a preacher. Kabnis enters the room last. The men exchange light conversation, establishing that Kabnis is from the north. They discuss the differences in culture between the north and the south. Halsey tells Kabnis that the white man rules Georgia. He warns Kabnis not to go against the white authority.

Kabnis questions whether whites would do anything violent to blacks of their stature. Layman claims stature makes no difference, that whites view blacks as either good or bad. Sometimes, they'll even mix up who is good and who is bad, even in a lynching.

Halsey and Layman halfway joke about lynching. Kabnis wants to know more. Halsey asks Layman to tell a story about when he saw white men cut up a dead black man. Kabnis seems alarmed and questions what can be done about the violent actions towards blacks. The stories continue, and the men hear singing from the church. Kabnis is bothered by the sounds of a woman shouting in church.

The men continue to talk, first about the shouting in the church and then about Hanby and a man named Lewis. Lewis had an argument with Hanby recently about a dam that needs to be removed. People around town are nervous about Lewis because he's always asking questions. The subject moves to the lynching of a woman named Mame Lamkins. More voices and shouting can be heard from the church.

Kabnis is visibly nervous and unsettled. He asks to hear the story of Mame Lamkins. Layman proceeds with the story: Mame, a pregnant woman, was killed in the middle of the street. A white man cut her open and her child fell out, still alive. The man stuck his knife in the baby and stuck it to a tree. The woman was killed for trying to hide her husband. More shouts are heard from the church.

A stone wrapped in paper suddenly flies through the window. Kabnis jumps to his feet. The paper expresses an order that the "northern nigger" leave town. Kabnis, terrified that the note is for him, runs from the room.

Later, Kabnis, covered with mud, runs into his room and slams the door behind him. He has been running from barking dogs and shouts, convinced the whites were after him. Paranoid, he is struck with the conviction that they're hiding in his house for him. He panics when he hears voices outside.

Halsey and Layman come inside. They try to calm down Kabnis. They explain that no one is after him. Layman starts a fire. Halsey offers Kabnis a bottle of corn licker. They each sip from the bottle.

Hanby knocks at the door and enters. Hanby makes a condescending moral speech, which ends with his request for Kabnis' resignation, since he is not allowed to drink on school property. The men argue briefly. Halsey and Hanby then argue, as Kabnis sits in the chair debating on how to salvage his dignity. He ends up doing nothing but gesturing incoherently.

Lewis knocks at the door and enters. He is described as resembling Kabnis, if Kabnis were a stronger man. Lewis announces that the message on the rock was meant for him, not for Kabnis. Lewis calmly states that a group of blacks are not comfortable with his presence in town and implies that the thrown rock might have something to do with Hanby.

Halsey invites Lewis to come to his shop sometime. He explains that Kabnis is going to work for him. Lewis and Kabnis look at each other. Kabnis feels a bond with Lewis, which then turns to anger and revulsion. Lewis leaves, talking with Hanby on his way out.

A month passes. Halsey's workshop is described. The shop has a set of stairs leading down to the cellar, known as "The Hole." Kabnis enters and the two men talk about Lewis coming by the shop. Layman drops in with his lunch. Several men from town come in. Lewis enters after them. The town men, uncomfortable around Lewis, then drift out into the street. Halsey, Layman, Lewis and Kabnis talk about Lewis leaving town. Kabnis' contributions to the conversation are sarcastic and out of place. Lewis is established as a perceptive man who likes to read people.

Kabnis wants to know what Lewis thinks of him. Lewis complies. He says that Kabnis has been shown too much of life, so much that he can't handle it. Lewis describes Halsey next. He says Halsey belongs in the Georgia town.

An old white man enters the shop and asks to have his hatchet repaired. Halsey gives it to Kabnis, who botches the job badly. Kabnis is embarrassed. He feels the white man represents the entire white South that oppresses him. Halsey takes the hatchet from Kabnis and fixes it quickly.

Hanby enters the shop and orders Kabnis to fix the axle on his buggy and then leaves. Kabnis walks out behind him.

Halsey's sister, Carrie, arrives with lunch for Halsey and Kabnis. Lewis is moved by Carrie's presence. He is filled with the urge to protect her from a stark and lonely life in the country. He takes her hands and she responds to him, before remembering her ladylike manners. She turns away quickly and goes down into the cellar. Lewis asks Halsey about her. Halsey explains that she is feeding the old man who lives in the cellar. Lewis then questions Halsey about the old man. Halsey invites Lewis back to the shop that night, when they're planning to have a party in the cellar. Kabnis tells Lewis he can talk to the old man then.

Carrie returns and says the old man hasn't been eating. Lewis thinks more about Carrie before he decides to leave.

That night, Halsey, Kabnis, Lewis and two girls, Cora and Stella, descend into the cellar to drink and have fun. The prophet-like, gray-haired old man who sits silently in the cellar immediately intrigues Lewis. Lewis names him Father John and imagines he is a black savior. The party proceeds, and Kabnis puts on a ridiculous robe. Halsey pours drinks.

Lewis watches the old man and feels the old man represents the "pain and beauty of the South." The others talk briefly about their religious culture, which teaches that sinning is worse than death. Lewis sits silently with his eyes closed and the others ignore him. They begin to feel that the party is taking off. Lewis opens his eyes and the party mood evaporates. Kabnis argues with Lewis, telling him that he needs a girl. The argument continues as they talk about the old man. Lewis says the old man is a symbol of the past, while Kabnis argues that the old man is irrelevant to his past. Stella joins in the conversation, stating that the old man reminds her of her father, who used to sing in church. She admits that after her father died, she didn't care about herself any longer.

Halsey tries to separate himself and Lewis from the others by saying he wants to talk to Lewis about things the others would not understand. He makes a speech about wanting to be educated and knowledgeable. Halsey talks of Kabnis, saying he would be a better man if he'd stood up to Hanby. He asks Lewis what he thinks of Kabnis.

Kabnis overhears and confronts Halsey. Drunk, Kabnis begins to speak freely. He argues that he is a poet inspired by something horrible in his soul. That part of him is fed by everything evil in the people around him. He wishes that a white man could cut that part out of him and stick it to a tree.

Halsey gives Kabnis more licker. Cora pairs off with Kabnis and Stella with Halsey. Lewis feels uncomfortable and gets up to leave.

In the morning, Halsey wakes Cora, Stella and Kabnis, all of whom are passed out in the cellar. Kabnis is still drunk from the night before. The girls are busy doing their hair, when Kabnis suddenly exclaims that the old man spoke last night. Cora, Stella and Halsey leave Kabnis alone in the cellar with the old man. Kabnis talks to him, accusing him of nurturing the fear that lives in Kabnis' soul. Kabnis continues to yell at the old man, calling him names and claiming he is dead and rotting.

Carrie enters the cellar. She and Kabnis talk briefly, with Kabnis admitting that his soul needs uplifting. They talk of the old man and Carrie tells Kabnis that she believes the old man's soul understands things around him. The old man begins to speak brokenly. Carrie listens and encourages. He says the white folks sinned by telling lies in the Bible. Kabnis makes an obnoxious reply, and Carrie chastises him. Kabnis sinks to the ground, tired and ashamed. Kabnis later gets up and goes upstairs.

The story ends with a vision of sunlight in the cellar on Carrie and Father John. The sun rises outside and washes the town and the forest with light.

Chapter 29 "Kabnis" Analysis

"Kabnis" is the longest story within *Cane* and ties up the novel by incorporating themes introduced in earlier chapters. Literally, "Kabnis" is the story of a dark-skinned man from the North, who is overwhelmed with the white oppression placed on him in the South. His inner conflict is visible from the beginning when he praises and then curses God. He feels tormented by the natural beauty of the countryside and longs to be back in the city.

Kabnis is contrasted with the character of Lewis, an articulate black man, also from the North. Lewis represents what Kabnis could have been had Kabnis had more internal strength. Lewis is confident, curious and well-spoken. Kabnis, on the other hand, has let fear dictate his behavior. This fear leads to his demise from a schoolteacher to a drunk and crass shop worker.

The male characters throughout the story demonstrate a need to learn about and express their understanding of the world around them. The influences of racism, white authority, spirituality, the history of the black race, nature's power to renew and Christian

judgment are all prevalent throughout the story. Each of these themes has also been touched on throughout the chapters of *Cane*. Halsey and Layman are drawn to Lewis because they feel Lewis can help them understand these forces. Kabnis dislikes Lewis because he fears the outcome of these forces.

The old man in the cellar symbolizes the meeting point of these influences. He represents all that is good and evil in the South. The men's reaction to the old man indicates their willingness to accept the world around them. The old man angers Kabnis. He interprets the old man's mutterings as accusations. He believes the man's eyes are dead and unseeing. Lewis, however, sees the old man as a vision of the past and prophet of the future. He believes that the old man's eyes see more than the physical world around him. In other words, he believes the old man has a broader spiritual vision.

Lewis' interpretation of the old man indicates that he accepts his world and has hope for the future. Kabnis, however, fights and flails against the forces that seem to dictate his life. Both men have poetic vision, but only Lewis can keep that vision from consuming him. Kabnis cannot and an almost tangible feeling of oppression overwhelms him.

The story ends with the imagery of hope and renewal. The final scene in the cellar, with sunlight washing over Father John and Carrie, has a biblical quality to it. Carrie herself, as the only pure female character of the story, represents fertility and the future. The rising sun outside, described as a "gold-glowing child" that "sends a birth-song," reinforces the closing theme of new life and a brighter future for the South.

Characters

Avey

Avey is a popular girl inWashington, D.C. The young men on the street corner pay attention to the fact that she goes to visit a man, and they talk about her and the fact that they would all like to date her. She is a mystery to them, and to the narrator of the story. He tries to impress her with his athletic ability, showing off to her in basketball, swimming, and dancing, but she remains aloof. Eventually, he has an opportunity to kiss her on a ferry boat, but while he wants their relationship to progress, she treats him like a little boy, holding his head in her lap. Later, he becomes physically involved with her, but decides that her sluggish response to his passions is due to her being lazy. The last time that they are together she falls into a deep sleep, indicating that she feels comfortable with him in a way that she does not feel with other people, and that it has been a long time since she felt she could let her guard down.

King Barlo

King Barlo is a man who Esther witnesses falling to the ground and writhing in a religious trance. The people in the streets who witness his trance shout their encouragement, but the white people are suspicious: "Wall, y cant never tell what a nigger like King Barlo might be up t," the sheriff says. Soon after, Barlo leaves town, and for years Esther fantasizes about being with him. When she approaches him upon his return he is not spiritual; he is drinking in a tavern with his friends and mocks her.

There is also a "Barlo" mentioned in the story "Becky," who may or may not be the same man. When he sees that Becky's house has collapsed into a pile of rubble, with Becky probably under it, Barlo throws his Bible onto the pile and leaves.

Becky

Becky is a white woman who is ostracized by her neighbors in a small southern town because she has a child by a black man. Toomer offers no information about the identity of the father. Both blacks and whites in the town turn their backs on Becky: the white people say that she is a "God-forsaken, insane white shameless wench," and the blacks say that she is a "poor Catholic poor-white crazy woman." Even though both groups reject her, there are still people from both groups who help her build her house and who donate food and provisions to Becky.

When her son is five years old, Becky has another son, again by a black man. They grow up to be troubled men: "They answered black and white folks by shooting up two men and leaving town. 'Godam the white folks; godam the niggers,' they shouted as they left town." After they are gone, Becky's house collapses at some undetermined time, with her in it.

Big Boy

See Tom Burwell

Tom Burwell

Tom Burwell is the black man who is in love with Louisa in the story "Blood-Burning Moon." Many of the black people in town know that Burwell is headed for trouble: as they remind one another, he has already been sentenced to work on the chain gang for injuring people in knife fights. When the white man who also likes Louisa, Bob Stone, attacks Tom with a knife, he kills Stone and is subsequently hunted down by the whites in town and burned alive.

Carma

Carma is a strong woman, "strong as any man," who drives a mule wagon. The narration of her tale describes it as "the crudest melodrama." She has a husband, Bane, but he is a prisoner on a chain gang. He came home once from working out of town and heard rumors about her having affairs with other men; when he confronted her about it, Carma ran out of the house, into the cane field. When he heard a gun go off, he assumed that, in her hysteria, she had killed herself, so he gathered other men from the neighborhood to search the field, where they found her lying. They carried her home and put her on the couch, and it was then that he noticed that she was not injured, and had probably just fired the gun to get his attention. Angry at being tricked, he cut one of the men from the search party with a knife. Now Bane is on a chain gang, and Carma travels the country roads freely.

Esther Crane

One of the few female characters in the first section of the book who is not admired for her beauty, Esther becomes enchanted with a suspicious man, King Barlo, and becomes convinced that he is an important part of her destiny. When she is nine, Esther sees Barlo fall into a religious trance in the street: he shouts phrases that have a Biblical sound as people in the crowd that gathers around him chant to encourage him.

The whole town is captivated with his religious fervor, and when Barlo leaves town Esther remembers him for years afterward. The second part of Esther's story begins when she is sixteen, having a dream that is based on elements from the afternoon she saw Barlo: the store windows that were lit with sun are, in her dream, on fire; the people who had spit tobacco juice on the ground while he was rolling around spit their juice onto the fire; and the fire department rescues a baby, black as Barlo, which they give to Esther for safekeeping. When she is twenty-two, working at her father's grocery store, Esther remembers an affair that she had with a white boy and realizes that, even though

her skin is pale enough to pass for white, she could never be accepted in white society. She decides that she is in love with Barlo.

Five years later, Barlo comes back to town, driving a big new car. Esther leaves her place at the store to go and see him. He is at a friend's house, where people are having a lively party. She tells Barlo that she has come for him, but he just laughs at her. A "coarse woman" who is with him thinks that Esther shows a lot of gall, coming into a place like that and claiming a man: the woman assumes that Esther is arrogant because her skin is so pale. Esther leaves, humiliated.

Dorris

In the story "Theater," Dorris is a chorus girl who dances at the theater that is managed by John's brother. John works the dancers hard, making them rehearse and correcting them when they make mistakes. While she is dancing, Dorris fantasizes about being in love with John, but when she is finished he is so involved with his own fantasy about her that he does not speak to her. She takes this as a sign that he does not care, and cries in the arms of her friend, Mame.

David Georgia

David is one of the field workers who cut cane and boiled its syrup from it. First mentioned in the "Becky" section as a man who brought her sugar sap, he appears again in the section "Blood-Burning Moon."

Bona Hale

Bona is a white girl who becomes infatuated with a mulatto boy, Paul. She is from the South, and he fears that she will not be able to get beyond the traditional racism of her society. Her story starts in a school gymnasium inChicago, where she watches Paul and, in order to get closer to him, joins in a basketball game, even though she has already been excused from participating. Paul's roommate Art fixes them up for a date, and while Art and his girlfriend walk ahead and argue with each other, Bona confesses her love for Paul, although he is unable to return the sentiment. He is aloof to her throughout the date, and she leaves him just as he decides to open up to her.

Fred Halsey

Halsey is a friend of Kabnis. He owns a repair shop and is proud of his work, putting up with the degrading attitude shown toward him by whites when it is to his benefit. After Kabnis loses his teaching job, Hanby takes him on as an employee, hoping to show him a good life through working with his hands; Kabnis instead slides into drunkenness and subsequent ignorance.

Samuel Hanby

Samuel Hanby is the principal of the school where Kabnis teaches. He affects an attitude of superiority with blacks, but is subservient among whites.

John

John is the brother of the theater manager in "Theater." He is in love with Dorris, and has an elaborate fantasy about them being together, but he is also careful to make sure that none of the chorus girls like Dorris takes advantage of his position to further their positions. John puts on a gruff exterior, certain that Dorris would not want a relationship with him, when in fact that is her main desire. While watching Dorris dance he daydreams about what it would be like to be with her, but she, seeing the blank look on his face as he is daydreaming, assumes that he is uninterested in her.

Ralph Kabnis

Kabnis is the focus of a novella at the end of the book that is named after him. Like Toomer, he is an educated man, a teacher from the North living in a Southern town, where the people look at him with kindness tempered by the suspicion that he may try to think too much of himself. He feels lonely and afraid as he tries to sleep in the room that is provided to him by the school where he teaches, conscious of the stillness around him. He is uncomfortable in the South, unused to things like the chicken that makes noise outside of his door. The school he teaches for has rules of conduct for teachers that prohibit smoking and drinking, but with his friends Halsey and Layman he does both, discussing the best way for black men to behave in the hostile social environment. Their stories about blacks being lynched terrify Kabnis almost to insanity, although they laugh and tell him he has nothing to worry about.

After he is fired from the school, Halsey takes Kabnis on as an employee in his repair shop. He sees that black laborers are at the mercy of white people, who order them around without concern, and he falls deeper and deeper into despair. One night, while having a party with some prostitutes in the basement of the shop, Kabnis becomes drunk and rages against a silent old man who sits in the corner, accusing the man of passing judgments of sin against the entire Negro race. The next morning, he is too drunk to even stand up and go to work, and he realizes that his heritage, the social situation in the South, has sapped him of the intelligence and kindness he once had.

Karintha

Karintha, the focus of the book's first piece, sets the tone for the events that follow. Most of the first section is about men longing for women, and Karintha is a girl whom men find beautiful from her childhood onward. When she is very young, too young for them to have sex with, men already look upon with her in awe, and they excuse her faults

because they are so enchanted with her beauty. For example, "Even the preacher, who caught her at mischief, told himself that she was as innocent as a lovely November cotton flower."

Because she has been raised in a small, two-room house, Karintha is exposed early in life to the sexuality of her parents, who slept in the same room as her. When she ends up being sexually active with men, they come to her with money, implying that she might have grown up using her beauty as a prostitute. She has a baby out in the woods, and the text implies that she buried it out there under a blanket of pine needles before returning home.

Louisa

Louisa is the object of affection for two men. She works for the family of Bob Stone, a white man, who likes her, and she is attracted to him as well. But she is also attracted to Tom Burwell, a black man.

Separately, there was no unusual significance to either one. But for some reason, they jumbled when her eyes gazed vacantly at the rising moon, and from the jumble came the strange stir within her.

Although she likes them both, they each find it almost impossible to accept her attraction to the other. When Stone goes to Burwell, he is goaded into fighting, and he is killed. Burwell is killed by an angry crowd of whites. Louisa's story is told in the section titled "Blood-Burning Moon."

Dan Moore

Dan is a prominent character in the story "Box Seat." He is from the South, born in a cane field, a man with a violent and suspicious nature. When he visits the girl that he likes, Muriel, he discusses life as if it has to be miserable and painful, and he is bewildered when she sees it differently. He tells her,

Your aim is wrong. There is no such thing as happiness. Life bends joy and pain, beauty and ugliness, in such a way that no one may isolate them.

He is so desperate for Muriel's love that he tries to force himself on her, but is stopped by her landlady. Later that night, at the theater, Dan shows up to keep an eye on Muriel. He thinks of her as a slave of society's pressures. He is fidgety, and disturbs the people around him. When one of the performers goes to the area of the stage below Muriel's box and sings to her, Dan becomes very agitated, and shouts out, "JESUS WAS A LEPER!" Leaving after the performance, he steps on a man's toes, and there ensues a shoving match. The man and Dan go out into the alley to fight, but when they get there, Dan, forgetting what he is there for, wanders away.

Muriel

Muriel is a schoolteacher in the story "Box Seat." She lives in a boarding house, under the supervision of her landlady, Mrs. Pribby. Dan Moore, her suitor, sees the controlled life that she lives and assumes that Muriel is repressed, that society is holding her back from expressing her true self. When Dan becomes very physical with her in the living room of the boarding house, Mrs. Pribby, in the next room, makes noise to remind them of her presence:

Muriel fastens on her image. She smoothes her dress. She adjusts her skirt. She becomes prim and cool.

Later, Muriel goes to the theater with her friend Bernice. They sit in a cramped box seat. During the show, one of the performers, a boxing dwarf, sings a song to Muriel and offers her a rose, causing Dan to jump up and shout out in the theater, which leaves Muriel embarrassed by him.

Paul

Paul is a mulatto from Georgia, living inChicago, uneasy about living among white people and passing for white. When Bona, a white girl, courts him by engaging him in a competitive basketball game and then arranging a date with him through friends, Paul must deal with the question of whether he is going to become fully integrated into white society. They go to dinner and a dance, but he remains cold, which angers her. As they are leaving the dance, Paul notices a knowing look on the face of a dark-skinned black doorman, and he stops to correct the man's mistaken impression. "I came back to tell you, to shake your hand, and tell you that you are wrong," he explains. "That something beautiful is going to happen. . . ." When he finishes speaking to the doorman, however, he turns to find that Bona has gone.

Rhobert

The first character of the second section, Rhobert is described in symbolic terms as wearing a house. He has twisted legs from having rickets as a child, but he is also called strong because he bears the weight of the house on his shoulders.

Fernie Mae Rosen

Fern is the daughter of a black mother and a Jewish father. In the story bearing her name, she is described as being sexually attractive but cold:

Men saw her eyes and fooled themselves. Fern's eyes said to them that she was easy. When she was young, a few men took her, but got no joy from it.

Later, she becomes so uninvolved with sexuality that "she became a virgin."

The narrator of Fern's story, smitten with her beauty, boldly walks up to her while she is standing around with her family and asks her to go for a walk in the cane fields with him. While they are out there, he puts his arms around her, and she is touched by some sort of religious revelation that she finds overpowering:

Her body was tortured with something it could not let out. Like boiling sap it flooded arms and fingers till she shook them as if they burned her.

Overcome with powerful emotion, she faints in the field. After that, the people in town who had promised to protect Fern make some threats against the narrator, who leaves for the North soon after.

Bob Stone

Bob Stone is the white man whose family employs Louisa in "Blood-Burning Moon." He is in love with her, but conflicted because she is black. He already has a self-esteem problem because his family has lost much of their former social status, and he feels that he would be looked down on even more if word got out that he was involved with a black woman. At the same time, though, he is jealous of Tom Burwell, whom she is also dating, and is insecure about the idea of losing her in a competition with Burwell. He attacks Burwell with a knife, but the other man is an expert knife fighter and cuts Bob's throat.

Themes

Race and Racism

This book deals with the issue of race on several different levels. Most obviously, there is the way that blacks are treated within American society, both in the South and in the North. In the South, the element of danger is always present. For instance, Becky is rejected by both blacks and whites for the crime of having crossed the color line, having sex with a black man and becoming impregnated by him. There is suspicion of blacks by whites, such as the sheriff in "Esther" who keeps a close eye on the man who is in the throes of religious ecstasy because "y cant never tell what a nigger like King Barlo might be up t." For the most part, this suspicion is enough to keep the blacks in their place. Kabnis sees Hanby, his employer, intellectualizing his own fear when he tells him that "the progress of the Negro race is jeopardized whenever the personal habits and examples set by its guides and mentors fall below the acknowledged and hard-won standard of its average member." He also sees his friend Halsey take commands from white men while believing that he is improving his life by limiting his personal growth to physical labor.

The tension between the races has some very real, dangerous ramifications in the South in the 1920s. There are, of course, the horror stories told Kabnis, about lynchings and beatings and about the pregnant woman whose fetus was stuck onto a post with a knife. There is the competition between Bob Stone and Tom Burwell for Louisa's hand: Burwell wins the fight between them, but that does not matter because he is immediately killed by whites who will not tolerate blacks putting on a fair fight.

Aside from hostilities between blacks and whites, the book also examines the problem of racism among blacks, who look down upon people of mixed heritage. This happens more within the Northern stories, where the uncertainty of the situation between the races is in some ways more frightening than the certainty of hostility in the South. The thing that separates Bona and Paul, who have a mutual attraction, is his fear of his black background being found out: in the end, when he decides that he can deal with this secret, he shows this by talking to a very dark-skinned doorman and shaking his hand. In "Theater," Dorris is all too willing to believe that John would have nothing to do with her when her friend tells her that he is "dic-tie," a word that Toomer uses over and again for light-skinned blacks who think that they are better than others because of their similarity to whites.

Sex Roles

Toomer devotes the first section of the book to isolated portraits of single women, showing society's varied attitudes and the passions that men often project upon them. The first example, Karintha, is a sad, obscure figure who does not develop a personality on her own, but is only presented in terms of her physical attractiveness. As a child, she

is considered a sexual object even by the men who refuse to acknowledge that they think of her that way. She is left to run wild, to abuse animals and fight with other children, all without being scolded because of her beauty, and when she grows up she an object of lust, but not understood. After that, there is a succession of women who are misunderstood by men: Becky is left alone, so that no one even is sure when she died; Carma's husband jumps to conclusions about her fidelity and her suicide; Fern entrances the narrator of her story, although he can't say why and hardly cares to wonder; Esther is laughed at by the man she dreamed about for most of her life; and the two men fighting over Louisa use her as a status symbol against each other, with little said about who she really is.

In the second section, there is a little more interaction between the sexes, because the men in these stories long for the women without feeling that they have a right to them. This section is marked by missed connections, by love relations that do not work out because of assumptions made about the other sex. A prime example of this is in "Box Seat," which shows Dan Moore thinking that Muriel must be protected from society, which will otherwise take advantage of her passive nature, and becoming inappropriately aggressive because of it. The dominant symbol in this section is Mr. Barry, the dwarf who boxes himself bloody but then woos the woman with a beautiful song and a rose. Barry' s diminutive size makes Dan's macho posturing ridiculous. At the end of this section, Bona and Paul provide the book's most well-balanced couple, as indicated by their equality on the basketball court. Even with their mutual respect, though, the relationship does not work out, mainly because of Paul's insecurity about his race.

The story of Kabnis hardly touches upon sex roles at all. Stella and Cora, the prostitutes, use the men in their lives just as much as they are used. Carrie K. ends up being one of the book's most levelheaded characters: surrounded by disappointment, she recognizes the dignity of the past that everyone else is trying to run away from. The book that started with a woman who was little more than a sex machine ends with a sensitive, enlightened woman.

Alienation and Loneliness

The theme of alienation does not become apparent until the book's second two sections, although once it is revealed there it becomes visible in hindsight in the earlier parts. The short prose piece "

Seventh Street," which begins the second section, introduces the idea of urban isolation, showing the city street as the product of social inconsistency, a lonely place that is busy with people. The characters presented in this section have less social pressure to stay segregated than exists in the segregated South, but even with that relative freedom, they find themselves unable to understand one another well enough to enter into satisfactory relationships.

Alienation is one of the major problems with Ralph Kabnis, a pale-skinned, educated black man who has gone toGeorgiato find his roots, only to realize that his ancestral home wants nothing to do with the man that he has become. The first section of Kabnis' story is about his loneliness, as he sits in the still, quiet night in the room that has been provided him. He has insomnia because his mind has nothing to settle upon: the rules of life in Georgiaprohibit the way of life he is used to. As he starts socializing more in the story, he becomes increasingly alienated from his former life. He mocks the idea of being a teacher and praises the local food, all in an attempt to fit in with the people around him, a strategy which is in fact a success. Halsey tells Professor Layman:

He ain't like most northern niggers that way. Ain't a stuck-up thing about him. He like us, you and me, maybe all□its that red mud over yonder□gets stuck in it and can't get out. (Laughs)

The more Kabnis stays in the South, the more he fits in with the men around him, but his comfort comes at a price. In becoming like the men around him, he becomes bitter. He curses the old man who represents black history, and he drinks so much that he can hardly stand. Conformity requires shaving off the best things about his personality, in order to stave off loneliness.

Style

Narration

The narration of this book is uneven, changing from section to section, providing readers more with a feeling than with a direct story. Throughout the book, the language is very poetic, with words often chosen for their sounds and power. It even breaks directly into poetry, not only in the poems that hold their own pages but also sometimes within story segments, such as "Karintha," "Blood-Burning Moon," and "Box Seat." Because of this, critics have trouble with deciding what to call it. The critic Edward W. Waldron, for example, classified *Cane* as a "novel-poem." Others have called it an impressionistic piece or an imagistic novel.

The voices telling the stories vary greatly. There is often a third-person narrator, telling the story from an omniscient perspective, which means that the narrator has access to all of the characters' thoughts and can tell them to the reader. In "Blood-Burning Moon," for instance, the narration tells what Bob Stone is thinking, then switches to Tom Burwell's thoughts, then back to Stone's. There is also a third-person narrator that is limited to one character's perspective, as in the novella "Kabnis," or in the story "Esther," which relies upon readers thinking like Esther but not knowing what King Barlo really thinks until the end.

The book also makes use of different types of first-person narration. The stories "Fern" and "Avey" both have straightforward narrators, with the person telling the story appearing in it as the main character. A more obscure first-person narrator tells the story of "Becky." Throughout most of the story, it is not at all clear that this piece is being told in the first person, until the last full paragraph, when the narrator begins referring to "we." Having presented himself as a member of the community, he then gives himself specific details, telling about a particular ride that he took on a particular day. Much of the book's voice has a communal feel to it, as if the thoughts presented are those of everyone living nearby, but sometimes the narration edges very close to Toomer's particular experiences.

Symbolism

Because of the poetic nature of this work, much of what is significant is relayed through symbolism. One example is the cotton plant, which is directly mentioned in the poems "November Cotton Flower" and "Cotton Song," and is alluded to in other places, such as "Kabnis." Because many whites owned slaves specifically to harvest cotton on their plantations prior to the end of the Civil War in 1865, cotton has come to represent enslavement to many black people in America. Another symbol used throughout the book is fire, such as the sawdust fire that permeates the whole area like guilt after Karintha loses her baby out near the mill, or the fire that Esther sees in the windows of the McGregors' notions shop.

The house that is said to be on Rhobert's head, "like a monstrous diver's helmet," is an example of symbolic use of language. Of course, he could not have a real house atop his head. This use of the word serves to show that the things a house usually reminds people of□stability, permanence, a place where one belongs□weigh on Rhobert like a burden.

In the basement of Halsey's shop sits an old man, in the darkness. He does not move or speak. He does not seem like a real person□he has no real function in this story other than his symbolic significance. Lewis even points this out within the story when he says, "That old man as symbol, flesh, spirit of the past, what do you think he would say if he could see you?" For Kabnis, the old man acts as a conscience, reminding him of the history of African Americans. He is old enough to possibly have been a slave, as someone suggests, and after Kabnis has shouted at him long enough that he is focused on sin, the old man finally speaks, and says "sin," over and over. He takes on the significance that people ascribe to him, but he also has no independent significance within the story: there is never a non-symbolic reason to explain why he is sitting in the basement.

Structure

Critics have a wide range of opinions regarding the structure of this book, from calling it "perfect" to denying that it has any structure whatsoever. Overall, there is no clear pattern, other than the clear fact that it is divided into three parts, each concerned with its own particular theme. The action of the various sections does not overlap, and the characters do not continue from one segment to another. In the first section, there are two poems before each prose piece, but this rule diminishes by the beginning of Section Two.

The book's most ardent supporters point to the progression of thematic concerns. It starts with lonely, isolated women who have been rejected by society but are used sexually, and by the end of Section One the stories are about women who are not rejected, but are desired. In Section Two, the emphasis is on men who desire women but have trouble acting on their desires, mostly because of their uncertainty of their place in Northern society. Section Three is about Kabnis, a Northern black man who goes to Georgiato learn about his history. Throughout Kabnis' story, he becomes more and more like the Southern men who distanced themselves from the women in the very first segments. Readers who follow this structure closely can notice that, even in the absence of a plot, each "chapter" of this book (including poems and character sketches) actually does respond to what came immediately before it, moving the main idea forward.

Historical Context

The Harlem Renaissance

During the 1920s, the artistic scene among blacks in the Harlem section ofNew York City prospered and gained national attention. It had been coming for a long time: black writers had been published in Americafor almost a century and a half, since Phillis Wheatley, a slave who had been born inAfrica, published a book of poetry in 1773. In spite of the rich cultural heritage of African Americans and society's willingness to accept blacks as entertainers, there was a traditional reluctance to recognize the achievements of black intellectuals. In the later decades of the nineteenth century, the debate about social progress for African Americans split into two directions. Followers of Booker T. Washington, the founder of the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, felt that blacks would gain more by working at whatever humble jobs they were offered and earning the trust of the majority. Followers of W. E. B. DuBois, one of the founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), supported earning respect through intellectual growth and achievement. When the NAACP was founded in 1910, DuBois became editor of its magazine, *The Crisis,* which became an important forum for black writers.

World War I, whichAmericafought in from 1917 to 1918, had a great influence in giving blacks confidence to find their own intellectual identity. Blacks participating in the war numbered 367, 000, with many leaving the rural settings that their families had been mired in for generations and gaining introduction to a wider world, where they found less hostility between the races than they were accustomed to in America. Returning veterans were much more aware of the injustices that they faced at home, especially in the South, where laws prohibited them from voting or owning land. Many moved north, and the greatest concentration of African Americans in the North was inHarlem.

It was in this context that the artistic community inHarlem blossomed, giving opportunity and encouragement to young writers, painters, and musicians. As always, Americaaccepted the music of blacks first. The 1920s are known as the "Jazz Age," and black artists were the ones who invented this style of music. White Americans, disillusioned by the harsh suffering they had witnessed during the war, broke with convention by listening to Negro music in Negro nightclubs, givingHarlem a vibrant economy and increased visibility among the writers who influenced national tastes. Many of these whites who frequented jazz clubs were artists; still more followed an artistic lifestyle as a way of rebellion. As Harlem became the center of entertainment in the country's most prominent city, the people who lived inHarlem gained respect and attention.

Ironically, the earliest writers associated with the "New Negro Renaissance" only lived inHarlem for a short time, and neither identified with the plight of American blacks. Claude McKay, a poet from Jamaica, drew national attention when he published his ground-breaking book *Harlem Shadows* in 1922, but by the following year he left to live

inEurope. Jean Toomer lived in a number of places, with New York being only one of them. Soon after the publication of *Cane* in 1923 he left to become involved with the Gurdjieff Institute in France, and he never lived inHarlem on a regular basis again.

There were, however, many artists prepared to go through the door opened by Toomer and

McKay. Other black writers introduced to the world during this period include Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Arna Bontemps, and the historian Alaine Locke. Painters who made their name during the Harlem Renaissance include William H. Johnson, Lois Malliou Jones, Hale Woodruff, and John T. Biggers.

Segregation

From the end of the 1800s through the 1950s, many states in the South had laws on their books that left blacks at a severe social disadvantage, forcing them to rely on the mercy of whites almost as much as they had when they were slaves. These laws were collectively known as "Jim Crow laws," named so after a foolish black character in an 1832 minstrel show. Starting in the 1880s, states in the South began passing laws that required blacks to ride in separate railroad cars, stay in separate hotels, attend separate theaters, eat at separate restaurants, use separate rest rooms, drink at separate water fountains, and attend separate schools from whites. The U.S. Supreme Court upheld the rights of states to pass these laws in 1892, ruling in the famous case of *Plessy v. Ferguson* that it was acceptable for states to keep the races divided as long as the accommodations that were provided for blacks were, to use the famous phrase coined in that decision, "separate but equal."

The problem, of course, was that the facilities that were available for blacks to use were far from equal to those enjoyed by whites. Black schools were rare, and those that were run by teachers who were willing to work for practically nothing had almost nonexistent operating budgets. Public transportation in black neighborhoods was scarce, while laws prevented well-to-do blacks from moving to white neighborhoods. White landlords could neglect properties in black neighborhoods, knowing that their tenants had few options about where they could live. Medical facilities offered to blacks were primitive.

The situation caused by Jim Crow laws in the South did not change until the 1950s, when television made it possible for civil rights activists to draw the nation's attention to the injustice of segregation. In 1955 Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. led a boycott of public transportation inMontgomery, Alabama, when Rosa Parks, a black woman who refused to ride in the back of the bus, was arrested. In 1963 state officials of Mississippi caused a riot when they refused to uphold a court order allowing a black man, James Meredith, to enroll; the National Guard had to be brought out to defend citizens against the state militia. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 has set national standards for equal treatment of people of all races.

Critical Overview

Cane was a phenomenal critical success from its first printing, but it was a commercial failure, with fewer than 5000 copies published during Jean Toomer's lifetime. Some biographers and critics refer to this fact to explain why the author never followed it up with another novel. It was published in 1923, a time when the literary world was alive with writers like Toomer who experimented with traditional narrative styles, and the critics were very receptive to the novel's uniqueness, in some cases even overenthusiastic. Darwin T. Turner, who has written much about Toomer's career, captured some of the enthusiasm of the early praise in his introduction to the 1975 edition of *Cane:*

Lola Ridge, editor of *Broom,* predicted that Toomer would be the most widely discussed author of his generation, which is remembered now for such individuals as Sherwood Anderson, Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and William Faulkner. John Mc-Clure, editor of *Double Dealer,* had favorably compared Toomer's lyricism with Sherwood Anderson.

Anderson was an older writer, whose powerful artistic sensibilities and willingness to help other writers made him something of a mentor to many of the writers of the nineteen twenties, including some of those mentioned above. In a different book entitled *In A Minor Chord,* Turner quoted a letter fromAnderson to Toomer praising his work: "You are the only negro . . . who seems really to have consciously the artist's impulse."

AsAnderson's comment indicates, the critical reception of *Cane* was not just about Toomer's achievement as a writer, but as a Negro writer, which, in the 1920s was rare but increasingly important. He is often associated with the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s, but Toomer was, at best, on the outskirts of the intellectual scene inHarlem. Arna Bontemps, one of the most influential writers to have come out of that movement, captured the social significance of *Cane* in his introduction to the 1969 edition of the book, published by Perennial Classics. "Only two small printings were issued, and these vanished quickly," Bontemps wrote. "However, among the most affected was practically an entire generation of young Negro writers then just beginning to emerge; their reaction to Toomer's *Cane* marked an awakening that soon thereafter began to be called a Negro Renaissance." He went on to list such luminaries as Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and Wallace Thurman as having been influenced by this book. Bontemps captures this critical response with the words of one writer, Charles S. Johnson, a distinguished scholar and sociologist. "Here was the Negro artist," he quotes Johnson saying, "detached from propaganda, sensitive only to beauty. Where [Paul Laurence] gave to the unnamed Negro peasant a reassuring touch of humanity, Toomer gave to the peasant a passionate charm . . . more than any artist, he was an experimentalist, and this last quality has carried him away from what was, perhaps, the most astonishingly brilliant beginning of any Negro writer of this generation."

Brian Joseph Benson and Mabel Mayle Dil-lard, in a 1980 book about Toomer's career, explain the novel's perseverance as resulting from the absolute dedication of its early readers. They wrote that "it is apparent that *Cane* became one of those classics kept alive by word of mouth and sheer admiration on the part of readership. This is a verifiable statement since, when it came time for those successful figures of the 1920s to write their memoirs, *Cane* is mentioned time after time as one book which stuck in the mind as an inspirational work."

Although the book was remembered by its fervent admirers, the rest of the world forgot it, as Toomer slipped from the public's consciousness each year that he did not publish a book. He only published sporadically, and refused to allow excerpts from *Cane* to appear in anthologies of writings by blacks, claiming that he was not a Negro. The novels that he did write were rejected by editors. According to Nellie Y. McKay, in her 1984 study of his career, "The editors and publishers who rejected Toomer's manuscripts for fifteen years did not do so capriciously, or with malice aforethought. The stories that issued from his pen during this time were turned down because they were tedious and described uninteresting people around whom he was unable to develop dramatic plots." In the years before his death, he published poetry and book reviews, but not fiction.

The revival of Toomer's reputation came soon after he died, in the 1960s. It was marked by racial turmoil, when blacks were, in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement and the deaths of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr., being asked to raise their awareness of their identities. In this context, the richness of *Cane* was able to stand out. New studies of Toomer's life appeared in the 1970s, chronicling the tragedy of his early promise gone to seed. *Cane* has never been out of print since then.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Kelly is an instructor of creative writing and literature at several community colleges inIllinois. In the following essay, he examines the circular design ofCane, *comparing the female characters who begin and end the book.*

One of the most impressive things about Jean Toomer's *Cane* is the way it gave fresh characterizations of African Americans at a time when existent literature about them was scant. Another is the complete freedom that Toomer exercised in his use of language, binding himself to neither traditional English nor the (now dated) black dialect that he used from time to time. His most sublime achievement, though, is in the area of structure. A casual reader□one who finishes the book with only a quick, shallow impression□might not see any overall pattern. Its individual parts don't fit together in any conventional sense of narrative.

It was Toomer's contention, though, that the book is designed as a circle, coming around to itself in the end, with final ideas bringing readers to beginning ones. If one focuses on the dissimilarities between the starting and finishing segments, this seems entirely unlikely. There could hardly be more difference than that between the educated, angst-ridden Ralph Kabnis, who has grown into adulthood without knowing what he is really about, and the spoiled nature-child Karintha, whose soul has "ripened too soon." There could hardly be more stylistic difference than that between her brief sketch and his novella.

Cane is, however, a book that will not let readers rest assured with their feeling that they know the truth. In a linear sense, "Kabnis" is completely different than "Karintha," and so it is only fitting that the two should be at opposite ends of the book. But within "Kabnis" there is the story of Carrie K. She is the last female character in a book loaded with varieties of female characters, and she inverts the Southern values that the book begins with in Karintha's story. The story of Ralph Kabnis is interesting on its own, but it is Carrie K., mirror image to Karintha, who makes it part of a book.

The story of Karintha is a strange, disturbing place to begin, but it is appropriate for a book that is meant to circle back: it reads like an ending, not a beginning. By the end of this two-page segment, Karintha is old and worn out, even though she is only twenty. She "has been married many times," although this is most likely in a figurative, not literal, sense. She has had a child out in the forest and buried it there, under the pine needles, with the pine smoke from the mill following her back to town and, like a guilty conscience, infesting everything, even the water she drinks. She has men coming to her and giving her money, like a prostitute.

What makes this a strange place to start a book is that Karintha is irredeemable. She doesn't appear to have a shred of hope in her by the end, only misery and the memory of the promise she lost. Her childish misbehavior, which the men all indulged because they could not bear to handle such a beauty roughly, has forced her to find her own values, aging her soul□the end of "Karintha" marks an end, not a beginning.Sunrise is a

likely place to start a book, because it represents a new start: by contrast, Karintha's story likens her to dusk in the beginning, the middle, and the end.

The book that follows keeps returning to the ideas that are touched on in this opening segment, as if to unravel the destruction of Karintha's life, to find some way to grant her amnesty for the crimes her circumstances have driven her to. In the subsequent stories, readers see men reacting to women's beauty; morality dictated by society; black characters wondering how their world has led them astray, how their childhoods steered them wrong. Carma's mannish appearance gives her a freedom from all the men (except the narrator) that Karintha will never have. Esther, too, has freedom from the men who are always around to pressure the characters with physical beauty, but her soul matures wrapped around the mistaken impression she has of one particular man, King Barlo. Avey, like Karintha, is the object of men's desires, and she ends up exhausted. Muriel might as well be from a different planet as Karintha, because it would be virtually impossible for them to understand one another□Muriel is concerned about her reputation, both with her landlady and out in the public theater, which Dan Moore feels is an unhealthy suppression of her true sexual nature (unaware, of course, of the tragic results that leaving sexuality unchained caused for Karintha).

Toomer himself said that the true end of this book's circle was the story of Bona and Paul. Here, readers see the theme of sexual predation work itself out in healthy, robust competition: Bona is certainly Paul's match, not because she uses her feminine beauty to control him but because she puts an effort into being his equal. The theme of racial inequity, though, is not solved. There are two ways to read the ending. The most direct reading is that Bona, watching Paul shake hands with a black doorman, realizes the full implications of his racial identity, and leaves, implying that racial merging could never happen even for two people attracted to one another as these. The less simple reading, more in keeping with the sad tone of the book, is that Paul loses his chance at love because he has hesitated, taking too long deciding what he wants his identity to be. If Karintha is all response, giving the young and old men what they want, Paul is the opposite□all thought and little action.

The story of Kabnis, then, makes an excellent beginning. Like Toomer himself, Kabnis is a light-skinned educator seeking self-identity in the South□the character's quest begins where the author's did. And the mud of Georgiapulls Kabnis down. He starts off as a sophisticate, to some extent even a little snobbish about the locals' primitive beliefs, and he ends up a bib-overalled laborer: like the others only less skilled, and so infantilized by liquor that he is unable to stand on his own two feet.

In this, the largest section of *Cane,* there is much confusion, made worse by the jumbled rambling of the stream-of-consciousness narration, which brings Ralph Kabnis' confused thoughts to life. There is Kabnis' self-hatred, which if anything is fueled by the violence and callousness of the white community that surrounds him. There is religious mystery, in the form of Father John, who sits day and night at the table in the Hole; defiance in Louis; resignation in Halsey; and surrender in Hanby. The only character who is content and secure in this section is Carrie K.

Sister of Fred Halsey, she is considered an "adolescent." When Kabnis thinks about her, he does consider her body, shying away from thinking of her sexually the way that the old and young men tried to avoid thinking of Karintha when she was too young. "There is a slight stoop to her shoulders," Kabnis observes. "The curves of her body blend with this to a soft, rounded charm." His thought about the curves of her body indicates that he could easily sexualize her in the way that Karintha is sexualized in her youth.

Toomer shifts to Louis' point of view for the thought that Kabnis comes near to, the idea that young Carrie K. is wasting her virginity. Like Dan Moore, he worries that society is depriving her of life. "He sees the nascent woman, her flesh already stiffening to cartilage, drying to bone. Her spirit-bloom, even now touched sullen, bitter. Her rich beauty fading. . . ." The cause, Louis assumes, is the society around her. "The sin-bogies of respectable southern colored folk clamor at her: 'Look out! Be a *good* girl. Look out!'" In another context, readers might be tempted to go along with his fear, but not within a book that starts with the story of Karintha, who is ruined at an early age precisely because no one told her to look out.

Carrie is rooted to her society, not anchored by it or (as Louis assumes) oppressed by it. He mistakenly sees her caring for her brother and the silent old man as servitude, not realizing that her involvement with them gives her the sort of human interaction that most characters in *Cane* lack and sorely need. The old man, who they call Father John, might be a Christ figure, but this Christ is blind and deaf, and cannot communicate with people directly. What Carrie says of him□"He's deaf and blind, but I reckon he hears, and sees too, from the things I've heard"□does not make sense, except on a complex spiritual level. Few characters in this book have the spiritual complexity to see beyond the misery of their own lives.

Karintha has a baby and abandons it out among the pines. Stella, one of the prostitutes that Halsey and Kabnis bring down into the Hole where Father John lives, is described thinking: "She'd like to take Kabnis to some distant pine grove and nurse and mother him." It is hardly likely she could, with the bitter way her family has been destroyed according to the story she tells about a white man stealing her mother away.

"Boars an kids an fools□ that's all I've ever known," she explains. Instead of taking Kabnis and mothering him, she is claimed by Halsey as his sexual prize, and she goes off with him.

Carrie K. does mother him. Like a child, he finds it impossible to walk, and she helps him. She dresses him, or at least shows him when it is time to change out of his bathrobe and to dress to face the world. When he trips on the coal bucket and curses, she answers calmly with the last spoken words of the book: "Jesus, come." Her firm cool hands draw from him the fever of anger and confusion.

Carrie K. is the opposite of Karintha: the antidote to her sickness, the correction to what went wrong at the beginning of the book. The "Kabnis" story is about an educated man sinking to Karintha's level of instinctiveness, but it brings with it another black woman, one who is Karintha's social equal, her moral superior. Carrie K. is Karintha inverted.

More than a circle, this book operates like a Mobius strip, a piece of paper that is twisted over before the two ends are attached, so that one can follow it continuously for infinity.

Source: David Kelly, in an essay for *Novels for Students,* Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

In the following introduction to Jean Toomer and the Terrors of American History, *Scruggs and VanDemarr provide political background on* Cane *and its public rediscovery forty-five years after initial publication.*

Jean Toomer and the Terrors of American History is about a literary life and its complicated relationships to the social, political, and economic worlds in which the writer lived and worked. In particular it is about the African-American writer Jean Toomer and his major book, the hybrid short story cycle *Cane,* first published in 1923. For more than three decades a kind of subterranean text, not forgotten but unavailable, *Cane* had been a critical success rather than a popular one in 1923, and though its publisher reprinted it in 1927 (no doubt to capitalize on the rise of the Harlem Renaissance), it would not be reprinted again until 1969, two years after Toomer's death. In 1969, in the midst of a revival of interest in black writing, Robert Bone's review of the first paperback edition appeared in the *New York Times Book Review* with the headline "The Black Classic That Discovered 'Soul' Is Rediscovered after 45 Years," and *Cane's* revival was securely launched. TheNew York literary world's approval was something Toomer the author would have appreciated.

Cane became a canonic text rather late, but it was never quite a lost text; despite the *Times's* headline, *Cane* was "rediscovered" only in the sense that the mass-market edition made it available, as Bone remarked, "to the general reader." The importance of reprinting for a book's long-term survival should not be underestimated, but in this case the critical effort to remember *Cane,* which can be traced in Therman B. O'Daniel's excellent bibliography of Toomer, was equally important. Though excluded from "mainstream" anthologies of American literature, selections from *Cane,* a few poems and stories, were more or less continuously in print between 1927 and 1969□this despite the fact that Toomer himself sometimes declined to appear in "Negro" anthologies. Some critics of African-American writing also made sure Toomer's work was not forgotten: Alain Locke, Sterling Brown, J. Saunders Redding, Hugh M. Gloster, and particularly Bone and Arna Bontemps.

Since 1970 *Cane* has become an important text, and Jean Toomer has become the subject of biographies and book-length literary studies. After 1923 Toomer continued writing almost until the year of his death, accumulating a huge archive of unpublished work, most of it now collected atYale University's Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. Understandably, much of the recent interest in Toomer has focused on this unpublished writing, particularly parts of his multiple autobiographies and the record of his "spiritualist" work after 1923; there has also been a tendency to read backward and inter pret *Cane* in light of selected bits of this material. However, in part because of this concentration on the later writing, the now considerable body of scholarship about Toomer leaves important areas of his life and work untouched, especially the historical contexts within which Toomer began to write: the social and political milieus of the post-World War I period. Neglected in most previous commentaries, these matters are central to understanding *Cane* and cast light as well on Toomer's other works.

Two words in our title, "terrors" and "history," describe what we have found to be lacking from studies of Toomer and what we have tried to begin recovering. A significant project for recent critics of American literature has been the rediscovery of books and authors excluded from the New Critical canon, and a part of this work has also been to investigate the dimensions of literature which the New Critics were little interested in studying. Not coincidentally, the literary circles of Jean Toomer worked on a similar project; as Waldo Frank observed in *Our America,* criticizing the canon established by the "Genteel Tradition" and the "New Humanists": "Whatever consciousness we have had so far has been the result of vast and deliberate exclusions." Cary Nelson's critique of literary history as it has been written since the 1950s summarizes one kind of exclusion:

The New Critics were at pains to point out that "literary history" generally omitted and obscured what was specifically *literary* about poetry and fiction, the textual qualities that distinguish literary language from other discourses. It may now, however, be more crucial to argue that literary history is typically (and improperly) detached from history as it may be more broadly construed□not only the familiar history of nations but also the still less familiar history of everyday life.

The background to *Cane* and the story of how Toomer came to write the book involve both "everyday" and national histories that had been "detached" from the text even as the complete text itself virtually disappeared for thirty years. *Contexts* have been there to be uncovered, but for various reasons they have remained hidden.

There is one obvious reason for the loss of historical□especially political□contexts for *Cane* Toomer's life after 1923 turned away from the social circumstances and urgencies that led him to begin writing, and this move toward religious and personal concerns undoubtedly encouraged critics and biographers to regard him as a mystic and spiritualist rather than as a political writer. After 1923 Toomer formed a series of attachments to spiritualists like George Gurdjieff and religious groups like the Quakers which continued virtually until the end of his life. It seems clear that Toomer's commitment to a "spiritual quest" was serious and deeply felt, but our study is not concerned with that part of his career, except to point out that the political Toomer who wrote *Cane* resurfaced in later years. We have tried to outline the historical context from which *Cane* emerged, examining ignored or neglected evidence about the specific background within which Toomer wrote his book, and to show how that background helps explain the political meanings of *Cane.*

The politics of Jean Toomer the writer and of *Cane* have been obscured by intentional disregard (even by Toomer himself) and by scholarly neglect. Although we did not begin our work with the idea of revising Toomer's biography, in the process of writing we came up against serious errors and omissions in the scholarship dealing with Toomer's life through 1923; correcting this record has made us, in effect, involuntary biographers. The most complete biography of Toomer is Cynthia Earl Kerman and Richard Eldridge's *The Lives of Jean Toomer: A Hunger for Wholeness*□the subtitle of which indicates its concern with the "spiritual" Toomer. In fact, Kerman and Eldridge devote only two short chapters to *Cane,* whereas almost three-quarters of their book is given over to the

religious quests of Toomer's later life. More important in our view, *Lives* contains factual errors and questionable interpretations and overlooks crucial biographical materials, particularly in its discussion of the writing of *Cane* and the social, political, and intellectual milieus that influenced it. We address specific errors in the notes to our main text, but the major problem is what has been omitted from the discussion of Toomer's life.

These omissions include a lack of attention to Toomer's earliest published writings, which are specifically political and which illuminate the crucial literary relationship between Toomer and his mentor, Waldo Frank. *In Lives* as, indeed, in all the published biographical writings on Toomer, there is no mention of the three articles he published between 1919 and 1920 in the *New York Call,* a prominent socialist newspaper. Although Toomer avoided any mention of the *Call* essays in his autobiographies, references to these articles appear three times in Toomer's unpublished writings, twice in the correspondence between Waldo Frank and Toomer and again in the biographical sketch that Toomer wrote for Horace Liveright on the eve of *Cane's* publication.

Most of the writing about Toomer has understated, or even ignored, the essential contribution Waldo Frank made to *Cane,* and this problem becomes more troublesome when combined with critical misunderstandings about the meaning of Frank's own books, particularly his key work, *OurAmerica.* Kerman and Eldridge, for instance, largely reduce Frank's significance for Toomer to the "spiritual" and the "religious," viewing *Our America* as a work focused on the idea of the nation's "organic mystical Whole." This phrase, however, offers little help in coming to terms with a book whose real foundation is political and social, as Toomer's defense of Frank in his final *Call* article, "Americans and Mary Austin," shows he well understood.Austin had attacked Frank as a Jew, condemning *Our America* because it presumptuously challenged the cultural hierarchy thatAustin, as an Anglo-American, was determined to uphold, and Toomer defended Frank on precisely those issues of "race," culture, and politics that were at the heart of *OurAmerica.*

In 1919, when *Our America* was published, Frank and others of his generation faced a repressive government. Bolshevik paranoia and war hysteria defined the national temper; anti-Semitism was at its zenith; civil liberties remained under "wartime" suspension; members of the liberal and radical Left were being harassed, jailed, or deported; major race riots (attacks by whites on black communities) erupted throughout the year. Randolph Bourne, Frank's friend and fellow contributor to the brilliant little magazine *The Seven Arts* (1916-17), wrote a brutal but unfinished satire on the tenor of the times called "The State."

Published posthumously in the same year as *Our America,* it conceived of America's future as a totalitarian nightmare. Some of Bourne's politics found their way into *Our America* as part of an extended socialist critique of American history, but Frank's book placed hope for resistance more in the cultural arena than in the political one. This choice was not a retreat in his view: he believed the artist rather than the revolutionary could radically remake American society, just as marginalized groups (Jews, Hispanics, Native Americans, African Americans, immigrants from southern Italyand eastern

Europe) might redefine an Americaas "ours" and not "theirs." Frank thought "culture" was a political force that might change society rather than simply reflect it, and his use of *religion* was tied to the social: art is "religious" (from *reli-gare:* "to bind") because it serves in the creation of the Beloved Community.

Although by the end of 1923 Toomer was on his way to embracing Gurdjieffism, this future choice is largely irrelevant to *Cane's* meaning. The "spiritual" always appears in *Cane* within a political context, that is, within a context concerned with issues involving the American polis. Toomer's politics in the period from 1918 to 1923□roughly the time during which he was learning the craft of writing and then completing *Cane*□were centered on socialism and on the "New Negro"; his first published essays drew ideas from both movements, which were contemporary currents in postwar New York City and which coincided in radical African-American magazines like Cyril Briggs's *Crusader* and the *Messenger* of A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen.

Toomer criticism has largely dismissed socialism as a significant influence on his thought at the time he was writing *Cane.* Critics paraphrase Toomer's remarks in the 1931-32 version of his autobiography, that ten days of working in the shipyards of New Jersey in 1919 "finished socialism for me." But the shipyard experience did not finish socialism for Toomer. He continued to move in the world of the New York Left after 1919, and in 1936 he wrote another version of his autobiography which completely revised his understanding of those days in the shipyard. Where the 1931-32 autobiography is satirical, even cynical□the shipyard workers "had only two main interests: playing craps and sleeping with women"□in the 1936 autobiography this satiric perspective shifts to the Gothic: Toomer admits his own fear of working-class life, that he did not want "to be confined in the death-house with doomed men."

The lot of these workers represented a brutal actuality that underlay society; working as a common laborer had shown Toomer "that the underlying conditions of human existence were ruthless and terrible beyond anything written in books or glimpsed in those forms of society wherein men, their behavior and manners, are veneered by the amenities of civilization. This is what the shipyard experience had done to me□and done for me." He was also convinced that socialism was a necessary solution to the soul-deadening, exhausting work of the shipyards: "I realized as never before the *need* of socialism, the *need* of a radical change of the conditions of human society." Like George Orwell□and indeed this part of the 1936 autobiography reads like *Down and Out in Paris and London*□Toomer would escape back to "normal" middle-class life, but the world of the shipyards would be present in *Cane,* in its keen social analysis of class and caste and in its Gothic portrayal of the terrors of American history.

Also missing from the biographical record are essential facts about Toomer's engagement with African-American politics and civil rights. The second *Call* essay Toomer wrote, "Reflections on the Race Riots," published in August 1919, raises important questions: Where was Toomer during the Washington, D.C., race riots of July 1919, and what was his reaction to them? Some of the worst fighting of July 21-22 took place in the streets virtually fronting the apartment Toomer occupied with his elderly grandparents, yet there is no mention of this in Darwin T. Turner's *The Wayward and the*

Seeking or in Toomer's other autobiographical writings. Toomer's contemporary reaction, a militant leftist one, is evident from his *Call* essay, but his later decision to "forget" that public history points up how difficult it is to determine exactly what can be trusted in the autobiographies.

One of the problems in Toomer criticism has been the use of Turner's autobiographical collage in *The Wayward and the Seeking* as an accurate record of Toomer's life. Turner's book has been valuable as a source for long-unavailable portions of Toomer's published and unpublished work, and Turner himself was clear in his introduction about the selective nature of the autobiographical fragments he joined together to produce a narrative of Toomer's life through 1923. But inevitably the largest portion of the autobiographical writings were excluded from this anthology, and some of those excluded pages are of crucial significance for understanding Toomer's political life. It is absurd that the half-dozen lines about working in the shipyards from the 1931-32 "Outline of an Autobiography" should be quoted repeatedly even as Toomer's many pages of reflection on the same experience written in 1936 remain unmentioned.

To a considerable degree the difficulty in establishing the basic facts of Toomer's life has been due to his own evasiveness. The problem with Toomer's discussions of *Cane* and its composition presented in *The Wayward and the Seeking* is a matter not primarily of which documents were selected, but of Toomer's own deliberate misrepresentation of those circumstances. After comparing Toomer's extensive 1922-23 correspondence with Waldo Frank, Gorham Munson, and others against the record of the same period in "On Being an American," one becomes very cautious of Toomer's selective memory, especially in any matter involving his racial identity. Similarly, the exclusion of the *Call* articles from Toomer's autobiography was his own choice, a choice that successfully "buried" them for a surprisingly long time. Such was also the case with the events of his life during the summer of 1919, though it is now possible□with the *Call* article and various hints in Toomer's unpublished autobiographies□to piece together a probable narrative for those months.

Beyond mistaking specific facts of Toomer's life, scholarship about *Cane* has never adequately treated the intellectual and historical settings of that work, though there are important exceptions in the criticism of Vera M. Kutzinski, George B. Hutchin-son, Michael North, and Barbara Foley, who have made valuable contributions to the recovery of *Cane's* background. That background, the political circumstances behind *Cane,* was varied, and included Toomer's activist engagement in polemics ("Reflections on the Race Riots" and "Americans and Mary Austin"), the traumatic circumstances of his stay in Sparta, his attempt to understand the mulatto-elite milieu of his hometown, Washington, D.C., and its ideology of racial uplift, and his ongoing effort to define himself as an "American." Although he wrote about these experiences before he renewed his acquaintance with Waldo Frank in 1922, it was Frank's influence that led him to think of developing this diverse material into a book. The euphoria Toomer felt over being associated with

Waldo Frank and the group of intellectuals known during the Great War as "Young America" cannot be overestimated. The members of that group were to move in

different directions after the war, but the ideas emanating from their vortex would give Toomer an intellectual context for *Cane.*

The brief mention of "Young America" in *The Lives of Jean Toomer* is the best available discussion of Toomer's relationship to this group, but it is sketchy and incomplete. Nor is it useful to characterize these people as part of the "Lost Generation." Whatever that phrase meant when Gertrude Stein dropped it to Ernest Hemingway inParis, it has a very limited relevance to Toomer's circle of New York intellectuals. Lewis Mumford, a member of "Young America," put the difference directly:

In contrast to the disillusioned expatriates of the "lost generation" who were travelling in the opposite direction, we [Mumford and Van Wyck Brooks] felt as did Randolph Bourne, Waldo Frank, and Paul Rosenfeld that this [task of reclaiming our American literary heritage] was an essential preparation for America's cultural "Coming of Age." For Brooks this remained a lifelong mission; and between 1921 and 1931, partly under his influence, I made it my concern too.

Mumford would say elsewhere that "what united me in comradeship" to this group was the idea of "re-discovery." Although he probably took that word from the title of Waldo Frank's *The Rediscovery of America* (1929), the sequel to *Our America,* he may have been thinking of Van Wyck Brooks's seminal article in the *Dial* (1918), "On Creating a Usable Past," in which Brooks saw American history, and especially American literary history, an "inexhaustable storehouse" of multiple pasts. Mumford, Frank, Hart Crane, and eventually Kenneth Burke came to see that America's usable pasts might be reclaimed in order to express a utopian future. The renewal of American life was also Toomer's concern, but Toomer's racial perspective on American society, past and present, complicated this theme in *Cane.* As much as he wanted to embrace the optimism of Frank and others, he came face to face in *Cane* not with a usable past but with the terrors of American history.

AsKerman and Eldridge's plural *Lives* suggests, and as most readers looking at *Cane* and the *post-Cane* work are likely to feel, Jean Toomer's life changed dramatically after 1923. Since we have read Toomer primarily because of *Cane,* we will look at only a few of his later writings, and those in light of the vexed question of what became of the author whom Waldo Frank at one time regarded as the most promising writer in America. Our sense of *Cane's* importance has led us to try to uncover the background for the book and to clarify its political meanings; we find little point in the current anachronistic tendency that attempts to link *Cane* with Toomer's New Age thinking after he came under the influence of George Gurdjieff and to read the book via Gurdjieffism or some other "spiritual" system. Fixing on the illusory search for "spiritual wholeness" in the text reduces, intentionally or not, its social and political dimensions, and ignores the historical background of the times and Toomer's intricate and evolving connection to them. To insist that *Cane* be a "spiritual autobiography" is to disregard his text's most important enactment: the transformation of the isolated spectator into the witness of history.

Source: Charles Scruggs and Lee VanDemarr, "Introduction: The Witness of History," in *Jean Toomer and the Terrors of American History,* University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998, pp. 1-7.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay excerpt, Baker asserts that with Cane, *Toomer transcended black Ameri-*

can literature of the 1920s to present a "thorough delineation of the black situation. "

William Stanley Braithwaite's "The Negro in American Literature," concludes with the rhapsodic assertion that *"Cane* is a book of gold and bronze, of dusk and flame, of ecstasy and pain, and Jean Toomer is a bright morning star of a new day of the race in literature." Written in 1924, Braithwaite's statement reflects the energy and excess, the vibrancy and hope of a generation of young black authors who set out in the 1920s to express their "individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame." They were wooed by white patrons; they had their work modified beyond recognition by theatrical producers, and they were told time and again precisely what type of black American writing the public would accept. Some, like Wallace Thurman, could not endure the strain. Claude McKay absented himself fromHarlem throughout most of the twenties, and Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen gained a degree of notoriety. Ironically, it was *Cane* (1923), a book written by a very light-complexioned mulatto, that portrayed□without fear of shame□a dark-skinned self that transcended the concerns of a single period and heralded much of value that has followed its publication. Arna Bontemps writes:

Only two small printings were issued, and these vanished quickly. However, among the most affected was practically an entire generation of young Negro writers then just beginning to emerge; their reaction to Toomer's *Cane* marked an awakening that soon thereafter began to be called a Negro Renaissance.

The 1920s presented a problem for the writer who wished to give a full and honest representation of black American life; for him the traditional images, drawn from the authors of the Plantation Tradition and the works of Paul Laurence Dunbar, were passé. The contemporary images, captured in Carl Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven* (1926) and Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* (1928), were not designed to elucidate a complex human existence, for they were reflections of that search for the bizarre and the exotic that was destined to flourish in an age of raccoon coats, bathtub gin, and "wine-flushed, bold-eyed" whites who caught the A-train to Harlem and spent an evening slumming, or seeking some *élan vital* for a decadent but prosperous age. That only two small printings of *Cane* appeared during the 1920s is not striking: the miracle is that it was published at all. Toomer did not choose the approbation that a scintillating (if untrue) portrayal of the black man could bring in the twenties, nor did he speak *sotto voce* about the amazing progress the black man had made in American society and his imminent acceptance by a fond white world.

Cane is a symbolically complex work that employs lyrical intensity and stream-of-consciousness narration to portray the journey of an artistic soul toward creative fulfillment; it is unsparing in its criticism of the inimical aspects of the black American

heritage and resonant in its praise of the spiritual beauty to be discovered there. An examination of the journey toward genuine, liberating black art presented in *Cane* reveals Toomer as a writer of genius and the book itself as a protest novel, a portrait of the artist, and a thorough delineation of the black situation. These aspects of the work explain its signal place among the achievements of the Harlem Renaissance, and they help to clarify the reaction of a white reading public□a public nurtured on the minstrel tradition, the tracts of the New Negro, and the sensational antics of Carl Van Vechten's blacks□which allowed it to go out of print without a fair hearing.

The first section of *Cane* opens with evocative description and a lyrical question. The subject is Karintha, whose:

. . . skin is like dusk on the eastern horizon, O cant you see it, O cant you see it,

Her skin is like dusk on the eastern horizon . . . When the sun goes down.

The repetition and the simile bringing together the human and the nonhuman leave a memorable impression. The reader is directly asked to respond, as were the hearers of such spirituals as "I've Got a Home in Dat Rock": "Rich man Dives he lived so well / Don't you see?" From the outset, the atmosphere is one of participation, as the reader is invited to contemplate a woman who carries "beauty, perfect as dusk when the sun goes down."

"Karintha," however, offers more than rhapsodic description and contemplation. It is a concise, suggestive sketch of the maturation of a southern woman: from sensuous childhood through promiscuous adolescence to wanton adulthood. The quatrain that serves as the epigraph is repeated twice and acts as a sharp counterpoint to Karintha's life, which is anything but beautiful: "She stoned the cows, and beat her dog, and fought the other children ..." In a sense, "Karintha" is a prose "The Four Stages of Cruelty," and its exquisite style forces some of its more telling revelations into a type of Hogarthian background, where they are lost to the casual observer.

There are elements of the humorous black preacher tale in the narrator's comment that "even the preacher, who caught her at mischief, told himself that she was as innocently lovely as a November cotton flower," and grim paradox appears after Karintha has given birth to her illegitimate child near the smoldering sawdust pile of the mill:

Weeks after Karintha returned home the smoke was so heavy

you tasted it in water. Someone made a song: Smoke is on the hills. Rise up. Smoke is on the hills, O rise And take my soul to Jesus.

The holy song that accompanies an unholy event is no less incongruous than the pilgrimages and the fierce, materialistic rituals in which men engage to gain access to Karintha. For the heroine is not an enshrined beauty but a victim of the South, where "homes . . . are most often built on the two room plan. In one, you cook and eat, in the other you sleep, and there love goes on." Karintha has been exposed to an adult world too soon, and the narrator drives home the irony that results when biblical dictates are

juxtaposed with a bleak reality: "Karintha had seen or heard, perhaps she had felt her parents loving. One could but imitate one's parents, for to follow them was the way of God." While some men "do not know that the soul of her was a growing thing ripened too soon," the narrator is aware that Karintha has been subjected to conditions that Christianity is powerless to meliorate. Her life has been corrupted, and the mystery is that her beauty remains.

The type of duality instanced by Karintha's sordid life and striking appearance recurs in Part One and lends psychological point to the section. The essential theme of "Karintha" is the debasement of innocence. Men are attracted to the heroine but fail to appreciate what is of value□the spirituality inherent in her dusky beauty. They are awed by the pure yet wish to destroy it; evil becomes their good, and they think only in terms of progressive time and capitalistic abundance□"The young fellows counted the time to pass before she would be old enough to mate with them" and ran stills to make her money. These conditions result, in part, from a southern Manichaeanism; for the land whose heritage appears in "Karintha" stated its superiority and condoned an inhumane slavery, spoke of its aristocracy and traded in human flesh, lauded its natural resources and wantonly destroyed them to acquire wealth. Good and evil waged an equal contest in a South that contained its own natural harmonies but considered blacks as chattels personal, bound by no rights that a white man need respect. In such an instance, love could only be an anomaly, and the narrator of Part One seems fully aware of this. When black women are considered property (the materialism surrounding Karintha and Fern) and white women goddesses (the recrimination that accompanies Becky's sacrilegious acts), deep relationships are impossible; the evil of the encompassing universe and the natural compulsion of man to corrupt the beautiful inform the frustrating encounters of Part One.

The two poems□"Reapers" and "November Cotton Flower"□that follow "Karintha" offer a further treatment of the significant themes found in the story. The expectations raised by the title of the first poem are almost totally defeated by its text. There are sharpened blades, black men, black horses, and an inexorable energy; but wearying customs, indifference, and death are also present. "I see them place the hones/In their hip-pockets as a thing that's done," the speaker says, and goes on to depict the macabre death of a field rat that, "startled, squealing bleeds." This event does not halt the movement of the cutters, however: "I see the blade, / Blood-stained, continue cutting. ..." An abundant harvest is not the result of the poem's action, and the black reapers, with scythes in hand, take on the appearance of medieval icons of death□an appropriate image for those who help to corrupt the life of Karintha. "November Cotton Flower" with its images of scarcity, drought, dead birds, and boll weevils continues the portrayal of a grim environment. Against this background, however, stands a beauty like Karintha's. The heroine of the first sketch was compared to a November cotton flower, and here the appearance of the "innocently lovely" flower brings about the speculation of the superstitious. "Beauty so sudden for that time of year," one suspects, is destined to attract its exploiters.

While exploring the nature of Karintha's existence, the author has been constructing the setting that is to appear throughout Part One. The first story's effect is heightened by the

presence of the religious, the suggestive, and the feminine, and certain aspects of the landscape linger in the reader's mind: a sawmill, pine trees, red dust, a pyramidal sawdust pile, and rusty cotton stalks. The folk songs convey a feeling of cultural homogeneity; they are all of a religious character, rising spontaneously and pervading the landscape. The finishing details of this setting□theDixie Pike and the railroad□ are added in "Becky," which deals with a mode of interaction characteristic of primitive, homogeneous societies.

"Becky" is the story of a white woman who gives birth to two mulatto sons, thus violating one of the most rigid taboos of southern society. As a consequence, she is ostracized by the community.

William Goede (following the lead of Robert Bone) describes her plight as follows:

Becky is, like Hester Prynne, made to pay for the collective sense of guilt of the community: after whites and Negroes exile her, they secretly build her a house which both sustains and finally buries her. The house, on the other hand, built between the road and the railroad, confines the girl until the day when the roof falls through and kills her.

Unlike Karintha, Becky is seldom portrayed in physical terms. The narrator has never seen her, and the community as a whole merely speculates on her actions and her changing appearance. She is primarily a psychological presence to whom the community pays an ironical homage: a spectral representation of the southern miscegenatory impulse that was so alive during the days of American slavery and was responsible for countless lynchings even in Toomer's own day. As early as the seventeenth century, southern legislatures were enacting laws to prevent sexual alliances between blacks and whites; hence, the community in "Becky" reacts in a manner sanctioned by law and custom.

"Becky" presents a further exploration of the duality theme encountered in "Karintha," and here the psychological element seems to predominate. The heroine's exile first calls to mind repression; she is set apart and finally buried. A more accurate description of Becky, however, is that she is a shaman. Among certain Asian groups and American Indian tribes, a person who engages in un-sanctioned behavior (homosexuality, for example) is thought to have received a divine summons; he becomes a public figure and devises and leads ritualistic ceremonies that project his abnormal behavior. The function of the shaman is twofold; he enables the community to act out, by proxy, its latent abnormalities, and he reinforces its capacity to resist such tendencies. He is tolerated and revered because of his supernatural power, yet hated as a symbol of moral culpability and as a demanding priest who exacts a penitential toll. The most significant trait of the shaman, however, is that□despite his ascribed powers□he is unable to effect a genuine cure. Georges Devereux explains this paradox:

Aussie ne peut-on considérer que le chaman accom-plit une "cure psychiatrique" au sens *strict* du terme; il procure seulement au malade ce que L'École de psychonalyse de Chicago appelle une "expérience affective corrective" qui l'aide à réorganiser son

sys-tème de défense mais ne lui permet pas d'attendre à cette réelle prise de conscience de soimême *(insight)* sans laquelle il n'y a pas de véritable guérison.

It is not surprising that analysts consider the shaman a disturbed individual; he is often characterized by hysteria and suicidal tendencies, and he remains in his role because he finds relief from his own disorders by granting a series of culturally sanctioned defenses to his followers.

Becky has engaged in a pattern of behavior that the surrounding community considers taboo, and she is relegated to a physical position outside the group but essentially public. Her house is built (by the townspeople) in a highly visible location, an "eye-shaped piece of sandy ground. . . . Islandized between the road and railroad track." The citizens scorn her and consider her deranged ("poor-white crazy woman, said the black folks' mouths"), but at the same time they pray for her, bring her food, and keep her alive. Becky, in turn, continues her activities; she has another mulatto son and remains in the tottering house until it eventually crumbles beneath the weight of its chimney. In essence, we witness the same dichotomy presented in "Karintha"; the South professes racial purity and abhorrence of miscegenation, but the fundamental conditions of the region nourish a subconscious desire for interracial relationships and make a penitential ritual necessary. It seems significant, moreover, that Becky□who is a Catholic and in that respect also one of the South's traditional aversions□assumes a divine role for the community. Attraction toward and repulsion by the spiritually ordained are as much a part of the landscape in "Becky" as in "Karintha."

The narrator is swayed by the attitudes of the townspeople, but he is by no means a devout shamanist. He duly records the fact that Becky's house was built on "sandy ground" (reflecting the destructive and aggressive feelings that are part of the shamanic experience), and he points out that Becky is a Catholic. Moreover, he sets up a contrapuntal rhythm between the natural pines that "whisper to Jesus" and the ambivalent charity of the community. The most devastating note in this orchestration is that Sunday is the day of Becky's destruction, and the vagrant preacher Barlo is unwilling to do more than toss a Bible on the debris that entraps her. In short, the narrator captures the irony inherent in the miscegenatory under-consciousness of the South. The town's experience with Becky provides a "corrective, affective experience" but not a substantive cure; as the story closes (on notes that remind one of the eerie conjure stories of black folklore), one suspects that the townspeople are no more insightful.

At this point, Toomer has set forth the dominant tone, setting, characters, and point of view of the first section. Women are in the forefront, and in both "Karintha" and "Becky ' " they assume symbolic roles that help to illustrate the dualities of a southern heritage. The beauty of Karintha and the beneficent aspects of Becky's existence are positive counterpoints to the aggressiveness, materialism, and moral obtuseness of the community as a whole. The omnipresent folk songs and the refrain in the second story bespeak a commitment to spirituality and beauty, while the animosity of the townspeople in "Becky" and the ineffectiveness of Christianity in "Karintha" display the grimmer side of a lyrically described landscape whose details pervade the whole of

Cane. The point of view is largely that of a sensitive narrator, whom Arna Bontemps describes:

Drugged by beauty "perfect as dusk when the sun goes down," lifted and swayed by folk song, arrested by eyes that "desired nothing that you could give," silenced by "corn leaves swaying, rusty with talk," he recognized that "the Dixie Pike has grown from a goal path in Africa." A native richness is here, he concluded, and the poet embraced it with the passion of love.

The narrator speaks in a tone that combines awe and reverence with effective irony and subtle criticism. There are always deeper levels of meaning beneath his highly descriptive surface, and this is not surprising when one considers Toomer's statement that in the South "one finds soil in the sense that the Russians know it□the soil every art and literature that is to live must be embedded in."

The emblematic nature of the soil is reflected in the tone and technique of the narrator and particularly in the book's title. Throughout Part One there is an evocation of a land of sugar cane whose ecstasy and pain are rooted in a communal soil. But the title conveys more than this. Justifications of slavery on scriptural grounds frequently traced the black man's ancestry to the race of Cain, the slayer of Abel, in the book of Genesis. Toomer is concerned not only with the Southern soil but also with the sons of Cain who populate it. In a colloquial sense, "to raise Cain" is to create disorder and cacophony, and in a strictly denotative sense, a cane is an instrument of support. Toomer's narrator is attempting to create an ordered framework that will contain the black American's complex existence, offer supportive values, and act as a guide for the perceptive soul's journey from amorphous experience to a finished work of art.

The third story of Part One. "Carma," is called by the narrator "the crudest melodrama," and so it is□on one level. When Carma's husband, Bane (surely an ironical name to set against *karma*), discovers that she has been unfaithful, he slashes the man who has told him, and is sentenced to the chain gang. This is melodramatic to be sure, but only (to quote the narrator) "as I have told it." Beneath the sensational surface is a tragedy of black American life. Bane, like Jimboy in Langston Hughes's *Not Without Laughter,* is forced by economic pressures to seek work away from home; thus, his wife is left alone in an environment where (again, according to the narrator) promiscuity is a norm. But Carma is also a woman who flaunts her sensuality, and can hardly be said to possess a strong sense of responsibility.

As in the previous stories, there are positive and redeeming elements in "Carma." The heroine herself is "strong as any man," and, given her name, this at least implies that her spirituality□ that which is best and most ineffable in her□is capable of enduring the inimical aspects of her surroundings. This is particularly important when one considers that "Carma" introduces a legendary African background to the first section: "Torches flare . . . juju men, greegree, witch-doctors . . . torches go out. . . The Dixie Pike has grown from a goat path inAfrica". The passage that introduces this reflection reads: "From far away, a sad strong song. Pungent and composite, the smell of farmyards is the fragrance of the woman. She does not sing; her body is a song. She is in the forest,

dancing". The folk song is linked to the African past, and a feeling of cultural continuity is established. The atavistic remains of a ceremonial past have the fragrance of earth and the spirituality of song and dance to recommend them, and at the center of this drama is Carma. She is strong (as Karintha is beautiful) despite southern conditions, and she endures in the face of an insensitive Bane, who is enraged because he cannot master his destiny.

"Carma" is also the first story in which the narrator clearly identifies himself as a conscious re-counter ("whose tale as I have told it"), and the poems that follow read like invocations to the heritage that he is exploring. "Song of the Son" states his desire to sing the "souls of slavery," and "Georgia Dusk," which makes further use of the legendary background encountered in "Carma," evokes the spirits of the "unknown bards" of the past. It is not surprising, then, that the story of Fern should follow.

Fern is a woman whom men used until they realized there was nothing they could do for her that would modify her nature or bring them peace. She is an abandoned Karintha, and in a sense a more beautiful and alluring Esther, staring at the world with haunting eyes. The narrator seeks out this beautiful exile who is free in her sexuality and unmoved by the all-pervasive cash nexus of her environment. However, when he asks himself the question posed by former suitors□"What could I do for her?"□his answer is that of the artist: "Talk, of course. Push back the fringe of pines upon new horizons". The others answered in solely materialistic terms, coming away from their relationships with Fern oblivious to her fundamental character and vowing to do greater penitence: "candy every week ... a magnificent something with no name on it ... a house . . . rescue her from some unworthy fellow who had tricked her into marrying him". The narrator, on the other hand, aspires to project a vision that will release Fern from her stifling existence; she thus becomes for him an inspiration, an artistic ideal. She is a merger of black American physical attractiveness and the unifying myth so important in black American history and in the creation of the spirituals.

"If you have heard a Jewish cantor sing, if he has touched you and made your own sorrow seem trivial when compared with his, you will know my [the narrator's] feeling when I follow the curves of her profile, like mobile rivers, to their common delta," and Fern's full name is Fernie May Rosen. The narrator is thus making use of the seminal comparison between the history of the Israelites and that of black America, which frequently appears in the religious lore of black American culture. In effect, the slaves appropriated the myth of the Egyptian captivity and considered themselves favored by God and destined in time to be liberated by His powers; this provided unity for a people who found themselves uprooted and defined by whites□historians and others□as descendants of wild savages on the "dark continent" of Africa. Despite the fact that she dislikes the petty people of the South and apparently needs to express an underlying spirituality, Fern seems to act as a symbolic representation of the black man's adoption of this myth. When the narrator has brought about a hysterical release from her, however, he fails to comprehend what he has evoked. The story ends with an injunction to the reader to seek out Fern when he travels South. The narrator feels that his ideal holds significance, but that his aspirations toward it are unfulfilled. There is some naivety in this assumption; for the teller of Fern's story has explored the ironies inherent

in the merger of white religion and black servitude. The religion of the Israelites is out of place in the life of Fern. While she captures□in her mysterious song like that of a Jewish cantor□ the beauty of its spirit (and, in this sense, stands outside the narrow-minded community), she is imprisoned by the mores it occasions. Like Becky and Karintha, Fern is a victim, and the narrator skillfully captures her essence. The apparent naivety at the story's conclusion is in reality an act of modesty; for the art the narrator implies is humble actually holds great significance (in its subtle didactic elements) for the culture he is attempting to delineate.

"Esther" is a story of alienation and brings an inquietude that grows into the concluding terror of the book's first section. Apocalyptic images abound as the heroine dreams of King Barlo (a figure who first appeared in "Becky") overcoming her pale frigidity with a flaming passion that will result in a "black, singed, woolly, tobacco-juice baby□ugly as sin". Edward Waldron points out that "beneath this superficial level ... lie at least two more intense and, for Toomer, more personal interpretations. One deals with the relationship of a light-skinned American Negro to the black community in which he (she) must try to function, and the other has to do with a common theme of the Harlem Renaissance, the relationship between the American Negro andAfrica." But one can make excessive claims for King Barlo. While it is true that he falls into a religious trance and sketches, in symbolic oratory, the fate of Africans at the bands of slave traders, it is also true that he is a vagrant preacher, a figure whom Toomer sketches fully (and with less than enthusiasm) in Layman of "Kabnis." And though Barlo is the prophet of a new dawn for the black American, he is also a businessman who makes money during the war, and a lecherous frequenter of the demimonde. It thus seems an overstatement to make a one-to-one correlation between Barlo andAfrica, or Afro-America. It is necessary to bear in mind that Esther Crane is not only a "tragic mulatto" repressed by Protestant religion and her father's business ethic ("Esther sells lard and snuff and flour to vague black faces that drift in her store to ask for them"), she is a fantasizer as well. Esther's view of Barlo is the true presented to the reader through most of the story; hence, when she retreats fully from reality at the conclusion, the reader's judgments should be qualified accordingly.

Esther's final state is described as follows: "She draws away, frozen. Like a somnambulist she wheels around and walks stiffly to the stairs. Down them. . . . She steps out. There is no air, no street, and the town has completely disappeared". The heroine is enclosed in her own mind; the sentient objects of the world mean nothing to this repressed sleepwalker. Given the complexity of Barlo's character, it is impossible to feel that such an observer could capture it accurately. Just as we refuse to accept the middle-aged and sentimental reflections of Marlowe as the final analysis of Kurtz in Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" and exercise a qualifying restraint before the words of Camus' narrator in *The Fall,* so we must recognize the full nature of Esther's character if we are to grasp her story and the role of King Barlo in it. Barlo does contain within himself the unifying myth of black American culture, and he delivers it to the community, in the manner of the most accomplished black folk preachers. In this character, however, he paradoxically contributes to Esther's stifled sensibility, which continually projects visions of sin. As a feat hero (the best cotton picker) and a skillful craftsman of words (his moving performance on the public street), he contains positive aspects, but

the impression that remains□when one has noted his terrified and hypocritical response in "Becky" and his conspicuous materialism and insensitive treatment of Esther□is not as favorable as some critics would tempt us to believe.

The feelings of alienation and foreshadowing generated by "Esther" are heightened by the poems that follow. "Conversion" tells of a degraded "African Guardian of Souls" who has drunkenly yielded place to white religiosity, and seems intended to further enlighten the character of Barlo. "Portrait inGeorgia" is a subtle, lyrical protest poem in which a woman is described in terms of the instruments and actions of a lynching. The second poem's vision prefigures the horror of the last story in Part One, "Blood-Burning Moon."

"Blood-Burning Moon" stands well in the company of such Harlem Renaissance works as Claude McKay's "If We Must Die" and Walter White's *The Fire in the Flint.* It is a work that protests, in unequivocal terms, the senseless, brutal, and sadistic violence perpetrated against the black man by whiteAmerica. The narrator realized in "Carma" that violence was a part of southern existence, and the shattering demise of Becky, Barlo's religious trance, and Fern's frantic outpouring speak volumes about the terror of such a life. But in "Blood-Burning Moon" the narrator traces southern violence to its source. Tom Burwell□ strong, dangerous, black lover of Louisa and second to Barlo in physical prowess□is only one of the black Americans whom the Stone family "practically owns." Louisa□black and alluring□works for the family, and Bob Stone (who during the days of slavery would have been called "the youngmassa") is having an affair with her. Tom reacts to hints and rumors of this affair in the manner of Bane; he turns violently on the gossipers and refuses to acknowledge what he feels to be true. Wage slavery, illicit alliances across the color line, intraracial violence□the narrator indeed captures the soul ofAmerica's "peculiar institution," and the results are inevitable. In a confrontation between Stone and Burwell, the black man's strength triumphs, and the white mob arrives (in "high powered cars with glaring search-lights" that remind one of the "ghost train" in "Becky") to begin its gruesome work. The lynching of Tom, which drives Louisa insane, more than justifies the story's title. The moon, controller of tides and destinies, and a female symbol, brings blood and fire to the black American.

Part One is a combination of awe-inspiring physical beauty, human hypocrisy, restrictive religious codes, and psychological trauma. In "Fern" the narrator says: "That the sexes were made to mate is the practice of the South". But sexual consummation in the first section often results in dissatisfaction or in a type of perverse motherhood. Men come away from Fern frustrated; Karintha covertly gives birth to her illegitimate child in a pine forest; Esther dreams of the immaculate conception of a tobacco-stained baby, and Becky's sons are illegitimate mulattoes, who first bring violence to the community then depart from it with curses. The women of Part One are symbolic figures, but the lyrical terms in which they are described can be misleading. With the exception of their misdirected sexuality, they are little different from the entrapped and stifled women of the city seen in Part Two. In short, something greater than the pressure of urban life accounts for the black man's frustrated ambitions, violent outbursts, and tragic deaths at the hands of white America. The black American's failure to fully comprehend the beautiful in his own heritage□theGeorgialandscape, folk songs, and women of deep loveliness□ is part of it. But the narrator places even greater emphasis on the black

man's ironical acceptance of the "strange cassava" and "weak palabra" of a white religion. Throughout Part One, he directs pointed thrusts□in the best tradition of David

Walker, Frederick Douglass, and William Wells Brown□at Christianity. Although he appreciates the rich beauty of black folk songs that employ Protestant religious imagery ("Georgia Dusk"), he also sees that the religion as it is practiced in the South is often hypocritical and stifling. The narrator, as instanced by "Nullo," the refrain in "Becky" ("The pines whisper to Jesus"), and a number of fine descriptive passages throughout the first section, seems to feel a deeper spirituality in the landscape. Moreover, there seems more significance in the beauty of Karintha or in the eyes of Fern (into which flow "the countryside and something that I call God") than in all the cramped philanthropy, shouted hosannas, vagrant preachers, and religious taboos ofGeorgia. The narrator, in other words, clearly realizes that the psychological mimicry that led to the adoption of a white religion often directed black Americans away from their own spiritual beauties and resulted in destruction.

But the importance of whiteAmerica's role cannot be minimized. King Barlo views the prime movers behind the black situation as "little white-ant biddies" who tied the feet of the African, uprooted him from his traditional culture, and made him prey to alien gods. The essential Manichaeanism of a South that thrived on slavery, segregation, the chattel principle, and violence is consummately displayed in the first section of *Cane,* and Barlo realizes that a new day must come before the black man will be free. The brutality directed against the black American has slowed the approach of such a dawn, but the narrator of Part One has discovered positive elements in the black Southern heritage that may lead to a new day: a sense of song and soil, and the spirit of a people who have their severe limitations but cannot be denied.

Source: Houston A. Baker, Jr., "Journey toward Black Art: Jean Toomer's *Cane,"* in *Singers of Daybreak: Studies in Black American Literature,* Howard University Press, 1983, pp. 53-67

Topics for Further Study

Some critics have drawn a comparison between the views of Hanby in the "Kabnis" section of *Cane* and Booker T. Washington, an African-American educator prominent at the start of the twentieth century.

ResearchWashington's views, and explain your feelings about his approach to the social positions of blacks.

Many of Toomer's stories concern the distinctions made between dark-skinned and light-skinned blacks, while some people might tend to lump all African Americans together. Make a collage of pictures of black faces, showing as many hues as you can.

The old man in the basement of Halsey's store only says a few words. Write a monologue for him, having him explain his history and what he thinks of his life.

An underlying theme of the first section of this book is the violence that threatens blacks if they stand up for their rights. Report on modern hate groups and the methods that they use, such as the Internet, to spread their intimidating message today.

In the Washington and Chicago sections of *Cane,* the characters would have listened to jazz music in the 1920s, but what kind of music would they have listened to in ruralGeorgia? Find some examples of the music they listened to and play it for your class.

One of the reasons Jean Toomer never produced another novel is that he devoted much of his energy to working for the Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man, spreading the ideas of Georges Gurdjieff. Report on Gurdji-eff's teachings.

Compare and Contrast

1920s: The Ku Klux Klan, a post-Civil War terrorist organization that works to suppress blacks with threats, property destruction, and murder, is reorganized after having been disbanded for fifty years, and begins a new campaign of lynching.

Today: The Ku Klux Klan still exists, but its violent activities are limited in favor of political activity.

1920s: Artists like Pablo Picasso and Jean Toomer create works with a distorted sense of reality, working with the new artistic principle of modernism, which rejects traditional forms.

Today: Postmodernism has rejected modernism by embracing traditional principles in an ironic way, mocking the humorless, serious "artistic" attitude of the moderns.

1920s: The radio is a new form of entertainment, allowing people to enjoy professional performances without leaving their homes.

Today: The Internet is the newest form of entertainment, allowing people to shop, do research, and download an endless supply of pictures, videos, and recordings, all without leaving their homes.

1920s: African Americans are, by law, forbidden access to certain hospitals, schools, and neighborhoods in the South.

Today: Laws threaten stiff penalties for businesses that discriminate because of race; still, most Americans live in segregated neighborhoods.

1920s: Middle-class white Americans flirt with danger by listening to the exotic rhythms of jazz music, coming from a black culture that is mysterious to them.

Today: Many middle-class white Americans listen to rap music that comes from a black culture that is mysterious to them.

1920s: Blacks are regularly murdered in the South if there is even a suspicion of their being involved in an interracial affair.

Today: Social disapproval still exists in many places, but Americahas become much more accustomed to the idea of blacks and whites marrying.

What Do I Read Next?

Toomer's miscellaneous writings, including plays, letters, and reviews, have been collected in *The Wayward and the Seeking,* edited by Darwin Turner.

Toomer's contemporary in the Harlem Renaissance, Arna Bontemps, was responsible for many works of poetry, fiction and criticism. One of his most compelling works is *God Sends Sunday,* a novel based on the old blues tradition.

James Weldon Johnson was an African-American writer who preceded Toomer. Like Toomer, he struggled against being labeled and dismissed as a "black writer." His 1912 novel, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man,* was more recently published with an introduction by Arna Bontemps.

Among the many great works about African-American identity written since Toomer's time, one of the most influential and most stirring is Ralph Ellison's 1952 novel *Invisible Man.*

Jean Toomer and Claude McKay are generally considered to be the first writers of theHarlem

Renaissance. McKay gives today's readers a sense of what Harlem was like at that time in his 1928 novel *Home toHarlem.*

Sherwood Anderson was considered one of Toomer's mentors, having encouraged him through the publication of *Cane.* Anderson's best-remembered work,*Winesburg, Ohio,* from 1919, bears similarities to the style Toomer used.

The Collected Poems of Jean Toomer was published in 1988 by theUniversity of North Carolina Press. It was edited by Robert B. Jones and Margery Toomer Latimer, the author's daughter.

Toomer was known for refusing permission to reprint his works in anthologies of African-American writers, because he did not want to be categorized as black. One of the works from *Cane* that is anthologized is the story "Becky," which is included in Mentor Books' 1971 collection *Prejudice,* edited by Charles R. Larson.

Further Study

Byrd, Rudolph P., *Jean Toomer's Years with Gurdjieff: Portrait,* University of Georgia Press, 1990.

A biographical study of Toomer, following his life from the time he first heard Georges Gurdjieff lecture inNew York City in 1924.

Kerman, Cynthia Earl, and Richard Eldridge, *The Lives of Jean Toomer,* Louisiana State University Press, 1987. This biography is useful in offering documented corrections to earlier misconceptions about Toomer's mysterious life.

Lewis, David Levering, *When Harlem Was in Vogue,* Oxford University Press, 1979.

This book is very readable, and tells the full story of the Harlem Renaissance, including literary and social perspectives.

Woodson, John, *To Make a New Race: Gurdjieff, Toomer, and the Harlem Renaissance,* University of Mississippi Press, 1999.

Woodson does a thorough, credible job of showing the connections between the ideologies of Gurdjieff, the religious leader, and his follower, Toomer. This book is required reading for understanding Toomer's career after *Cane.*

Bibliography

Benson, Brian Joseph, and Mabel Nayle Dillard, "Lifting the Veil," in *Jean Toomer,* Twayne Publishers, 1980, p. 50.

Bontemps, Arna, "Introduction," in *Cane,* Perennial Classics, 1969.

McKay, Nellie Y., *Jean Toomer, Artist,* University of North Carolina Press, 1984, p. 9.

Turner, Darwin T., "Introduction," in *Cane,* Liveright Publishing Corp., 1975.

--------, in *In a Minor Chord: Three African-American Writers and Their Search for Identity,* SouthernIllinois University Press, 1971.

Waldron, Edward W., "The Search for Identity in Jean Toomer's 'Esther,'" in *CLA Journal,* Vol. 14, March 1971, p. 227.

Copyright Information

This Premium Study Guide is an offprint from *Novels for Students*.

Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

Research
Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

Data Capture
Beverly Jendrowski

Permissions
Mary Ann Bahr, Margaret Chamberlain, Kim Davis, Debra Freitas, Lori Hines, Jackie Jones, Jacqueline Key, Shalice Shah-Caldwell

Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

©1997-2002; ©2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc.

Gale and Design® and Thomson Learning™ are trademarks used herein under license.

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.
No part of this work covered by the copyright hereon may be reproduced or used in any

form or by any means—graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, Web distribution or information storage retrieval systems—without the written permission of the publisher.

For permission to use material from this product, submit your request via Web at http://www.gale-edit.com/permissions, or you may download our Permissions Request form and submit your request by fax or mail to:

Permissions Department
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535

Permissions Hotline:
248-699-8006 or 800-877-4253, ext. 8006
Fax: 248-699-8074 or 800-762-4058

Since this page cannot legibly accommodate all copyright notices, the acknowledgments constitute an extension of the copyright notice.

While every effort has been made to secure permission to reprint material and to ensure the reliability of the information presented in this publication, The Gale Group, Inc. does not guarantee the accuracy of the data contained herein. The Gale Group, Inc. accepts no payment for listing; and inclusion in the publication of any organization, agency, institution, publication, service, or individual does not imply endorsement of the editors or publisher. Errors brought to the attention of the publisher and verified to the satisfaction of the publisher will be corrected in future editions.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". © 1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". © 1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) 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, NfS 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 NfS 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 NfS 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 NfS 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 NfS 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

NfS 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 Novels 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 NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS 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 Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels 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 NfS 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.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

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

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Novels 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 NfS, 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 Novels 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 NfS, 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 Novels 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:

Editor, Novels for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535