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upon a virile, black-skinned itinerant preacher named King Barfo. At sixteen she imagines herself the mother of his immaculately conceived child. At twenty-seven she tries to translate fantasy into reality by offering herself to Barfo.

Louisa of "Blood-Burning Moon" has two lovers, one white and the other colored. Inflamed by a sexual rivalry deeper than race, they quarrel. One is slashed and the other is lynched.

Part II of *Cane* is counterpoint. The scene shifts to Washington (D.C.) where Seventh Street thrusts a wedge of vitality, brilliance, and movement into the staid, soggy, white-washed wood of the city. The blacks, in his color scheme, represent a full life; the whites, a denial of it. Washington's Negroes have preserved their vitality because of their roots in the rural South, yet whiteness presses in on them from all sides. The "dicky" Negro, and especially the near-white, who are most nearly assimilated to white civilization, bear the brunt of repression and denial, vacillating constantly between two identities. Out of this general frame of reference grow the central symbols of the novel.

Toomer weaves these symbols into a magnificent design, so that his meaning, elusive in any particular episode, emerges with great impact from the whole. No paraphrase can properly convey the aesthetic pleasure derived from a sensitive reading of *Cane*.

Quoted from Robert A. Bone,
THE NEGRO NOVEL IN AMERICA

Critical Comment on Jean Toomer's *CANE*

LANGSTON HUGHES: 'O, be respectable, write about nice people, show how good we are,' say the Negroes. 'Be stereotyped, don't go too far, don't shatter our illusions about you, we will pay you,' say the whites. Both would have told Jean Toomer not to write *Cane*. The colored people did not praise it. The white people did not buy it. . . . Yet (excepting the work of DuBois) *Cane* contains the finest prose-written by a Negro in America. And like the singing of Robeson, it is truly racial.

ARNA BONTEMPS: A few people went quietly mad about the book . . . among these few was practically the whole generation of young Negro writers then just beginning to appear; and their reaction to Toomer's *Cane* marked an awakening that soon thereafter began to be called a Negro renaissance. *Cane's* influence was not limited to the happy band that included Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Eric Walcott, Zora Neale Hurston, Wallace Thurman, Rudolph Fisher and their contemporaries of the Twenties. Subsequent writing by Negroes in the U.S. as well as in the West Indies and Africa has continued to reflect its mood and often its method . . . certainly no earlier volume of poetry or fiction or both had come close to expressing the ethos of the Negro in the Southern setting as *Cane* did.

W. S. BRAITHWAITE: In Jean Toomer we come upon the very first artist of the race, who with all an artist's passion and sympathy for life, its hurts, its desires, its joys, its deft and strange yearnings, can write about the Negro without surrender or compromise. *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.

HIGH MORRIS GLOSTER: The chief importance of these stories lies in their departure from the traditional treatment of sex by Negro authors. The candor, shamelessness and objectivity manifested by Toomer in the presentation of these women caused DuBois to designate him as the 'writer who first dared emancipate the colored world from the conventions of sex.'

ROBERT A. BONE: Stein and Hemingway in prose, Pound and Eliot in poetry, were threshing and winnowing, testing and experimenting with words, stretching them and refocusing them, until they became the plant instruments of a new idiom. The only Negro writer of the 1920's who participated on equal terms in the creation of the modern idiom was a young poet-novelist named Jean Toomer. *Cane* is an important American novel.

CANE
Jean Toomer

*Counterpoint
Do we need this?*

Jean Toomer

CANE

"BY FAR the most impressive product of the Negro Renaissance, it ranks with Richard Wright's NATIVE SON and Ralph Ellison's INVISIBLE MAN as a measure of the Negro novelist's highest achievement. Jean Toomer belongs to that first rank of writers who use words almost as a plastic medium,

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shaping new meanings from an original and highly personal style. Since stylistic innovation requires great technical dexterity, Toomer displays a concern for technique which is fully two decades in advance of the period. While his contemporaries of the Harlem School were still experimenting with a crude literary realism, Toomer had progressed beyond the naturalistic novel to the 'higher realm of the emotions,' to symbol, and to myth. He attained a universal vision not by ignoring race as a local truth, but by coming face to face with his particular tradition . . . a vision of the purging soul of slavery along the Dixie Pike—a road which 'has grown from a goat-path in Africa.' It persists above all in the people, white and black, who have become 'grotesques' by virtue of their 'dave inheritances' . . .

There is Karimba, 'she who carries beauty' like a pregnancy, until her perfect beauty and the immaturity of a young man beget a fatherless child. Burying her child in a sawdust pile, she takes her revenge by becoming a prostitute.

In 'Becky' Toomer dramatizes the South's conspiracy to ignore miscegenation. Becky is a white woman with two Negro sons. Towards Becky there is no charity from white or black, but only futile attempts to conceal her existence.

Fern, whose full name is Fernie May Rosen, combines the suffering of her Jewish father and her Negro mother: 'at first sight of her I felt as if I heard a Jewish cantor sing . . . As if his singing rose above the unheard chorus of a folk-song.' Unable to find fulfillment, left vacant by 'the bestiality of men's bodies, Fern sits listlessly on her porch. . . . Her eyes desire nothing that man can give her.

'Esber' is a study in sexual repression. The protagonist is a near-white girl whose father is the richest colored man in town. Deprived of normal outlets by her social position, she develops a neurotic life of fantasy which centers

(continued on back flap)