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Cane: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract

This thesis, Cane: A Critical Analysis, is a study of Jean Toomer's Cane published in 1923. After years of obscurity, Cane has reemerged in recent years as a work of significance in American Negro literature. Cane criticism has seen Cane as a "Negro" novel, but has not considered its universal meaning, which transcends race. Also, by approaching Cane as a novel, most critics have neglected to account for several of Cane's primary structures, themes, images, and symbols.

Cane is unified by a tightly organized structure of epigraphs, songs, sketches, poems, and stories which share common themes, images, and symbols. For example, the epigraphs serve as compact folktale equivalents of the stories which they precede. Cane's three-part division heightens the contrast between the world of Georgia and the modern world represented by the city. Also, in an important letter which Toomer wrote to Waldo Frank in 1922, Toomer outlined his organization of Cane's three-part thematic structure, consisting of an aesthetic, a regional, and a spiritual theme. Each of the themes begin and end at different points in the book. The spiritual theme, which has been overlooked by previous criticism, forms a spiritual search on the part of a collective personality. This search symbolically encompasses the dilemma of modern man who finds himself largely alienated from his fellow man.

Cane's images and symbols form patterns which strengthen the thematic structure and therefore, further unify Cane. The source of Cane's imagery which is connected with the Georgia folk culture is found in the small inscription on the title page. In section one and three, which take place in Georgia, the symbols represent the close

identity which the folk culture has with the soil and with itself. In section two, the symbols represent the sterility, destruction, and the movement into self on the part of the folk culture.

In conclusion, _Cane_ is not a work dealing with American Negroes and their problems. Instead, the Negro and his experiences of suffering in America is the metaphor upon which _Cane_ reveals its belief in the passing of a world of feeling. Throughout _Cane_, the modern world is symbolically presented as unfeeling and loveless, while the world of the folk culture, which represents feeling and love, is presented as passing away.

Introduction

Jean Toomer's _Cane_, which is constructed of diverse elements and emphases, is a modern book of literary significance. _Cane_ is so rich in human experience that the book provides many far-reaching insights into the plight of human spiritual agony and suffering. From the earliest times this suffering has been associated with Jews, and in _Cane_ it is associated with American Negroes. This plight encompasses two kinds of culture, ancient and modern. The ancient culture is represented by a "folk" people. The modern culture is represented by the individual. The meaning of life which is real to _Cane_'s folk mind is recognized by the modern mind as an illusion.

The folk mind exists through a sense of illusion created by religion, myth, and superstition, all of which provide universal human meaning for the folk culture. The tragedy of the folk mind in _Cane_ is the destruction of its sense of illusion. Father John's dramatic statement embellishes the breakdown of this illusion. He reveals the spiritual emptiness and unhappiness that reality brings to the folk mind. In Father John's case, the illusion of the white-man's "Bible" enabled him to endure slavery.

The modern mind exists through its sense of rationality, made real through knowledge and empirical facts. The tragedy of the modern mind in _Cane_ is the endless search for a meaningful identity and self. Important human values in _Cane_ are values of the folk culture--love, compassion, and brotherhood. Each of these values indicates by its presence that life has meaning. The passing away of the folk culture is symbolic of the passing away of these values. In the modern

culture which takes over, the effects from the loss of these values result in a separation of emotions and feelings from the intellect.

Toomer brings forth the suffering of a folk culture which is torn from its homeland, brutally altered in slavery, and dissolved finally by modern civilization. The Negro and his experiences in America is the metaphor upon which Cane's theme of spiritual agony and suffering is built. Minor parts of Cane concern directly conflicts and issues connected with Negroes, for example, miscegenation, or, as in "Kabnis," identity with Negroes as a group. However, these emphases are the base from which Cane's larger universal implications begin.

The modern mind in Cane, which is essentially "raceless" and not tied to the concept of "culture," is revealed by a nameless collective personality who, in the form of several male characters and narrators of certain stories and poems, proceeds in a search for identity and self. Its search is characterized by a role playing of temporary identities, which follow varying ambiguous pursuits toward art or prophecy. This role playing is an endless search for identity which results in an inability to feel and, consequently, to love.

What remains unclear and unanswered by the body of previous criticism is Cane's ultimate meaning. The majority of Cane critics agree that Cane portrays the degradation, the materialism, and the sterility of modern life; and they also agree that Cane, in one form or another, concerns itself primarily with the American Negro's racial experience within the confines of modern environment. However, all of these critics fail to place Cane on a level which would include it not only as a "Negro" work, but also as a work of universal significance.

The implications of _Cane_'s full range of meaning are expressed in the small poem "Nullo":

> A spray of pine-needles,
> Dipped in western horizon gold,
> Fell onto a path.
> Dry moulds of cow-hoofs.
> In the forest.
> Rabbits knew not of their falling,
> Nor did the forest catch aflame.[1]

The meaning of _Cane_ lies in Toomer's belief that the modern condition of man is a signal that human feeling and emotion are passing away for good. The poem in lines one and two expresses a vision of the beauty of nature. This beauty, which "falls" on the "path" of life, dries up in "moulds." If a rabbit--or an individual--fails to recognize that this beauty exists in "A spray of pine-needles" or has passed in "Dry moulds of cow-hoofs," then the insignificance (null) of nature's beauty is tragic. This tragedy is universal because if the forest--or the universe--also fails to recognize nature's beauty, then the sensitivity which expresses and feels is lost forever. Therefore, the poem's implications throughout _Cane_ are that the values of the folk culture have passed and what is left is a world devoid of feeling.

Cane: A Critical Analysis

The meaning of Cane also lies in the careful composition of its parts. The general structure with its three-part division includes poems, stories, and sketches. The arrangement of the three-part division reveals the disintegration of the folk culture and the arrival of a world where illusion and faith and feeling are gone.

On the surface, Cane's three sections are characterized by a different setting in region and environment. Section one takes place in the canefields of rural Georgia; section two moves into the urban streets of Washington, D. C. and Chicago; and section three returns to Sempter, Georgia, a small southern town. The three sections provide the contrast between the aesthetic, regional, and spiritual themes, which unify Cane.

Cane's sections are further characterized by epigraphs, songs, sketches, stories, and poems. The small epigraphs found at the beginning of some stories ("Karintha," "Becky," "Carma," and "Seventh Street") are folktale equivalents of the stories they precede: in other words, Toomer has recorded a compact and terse folktale as an epigraph and then elaborated it through the loose and lyrical story which follows. The juxtaposition of epigraph and story functions as a contrast and complement between the world of the folk culture in Georgia and the world of the narrator. The folk culture sees the essential facts of a story, and the narrator sees the essential beauty of it. Also, the epigraphs have syncopated rhythms which set in motion counter-rhythms to the smooth flow of the prose.

Cane's songs are selections from spirituals or folksongs, which evoke feelings and emotions associated with suffering and memories of slavery. They are agents of release from sorrow and reflect and carry the spirit and soul of the remaining folk culture. Significantly there are no songs in section two because the folk culture in the city has been cut off from its life-giving roots and heritage.

The three sketches in _Cane_, found only in section two, serve as brief impressions of the existence of the folk culture in the city. "Seventh Street" is the rude "wedge of nigger life" (71) which has been thrust into civilization; it also acts as a rhetorical invocation --"Who set you flowing?" (71)--to the section's folk culture. "Rhobert" emphasizes the folk culture's materialistic acquisitions--"Rhobert wears a house" (73). And "Calling Jesus" portrays a woman who suffers because she has abandoned her folk-culture soul--"little thrust-tailed dog" (102)--so that she may live in the city.

The stories in _Cane_ form the major part of its body. On one hand, they are vehicles for the movement of the thematic structure. On the other hand, they are character portraits of the people who live in the particular region and environment of each section. Each section's stories have common characteristics not found in the other two. The section one stories portray women in rural Georgia who lead barren, loveless, unfulfilled lives. The section two stories portray men who make abortive attempts to establish relationships with women. And section three, a play prior to its inclusion in _Cane_ as a novella, portrays several approaches by different characters, male and female, to accepting the old and new way of the folk culture's life--the old represented by the remnants of life in the canefields, the new represented

by the movement toward the cultureless life of the city.

The poetry forms a substantial part of _Cane_'s body and has several functions. One is the relationship which many of the poems have with _Cane_'s stories. For example, Karintha in her story is described "as innocently lovely as a November cotton flower" (2); the flower in the poem "November Cotton Flower," which follows the story, becomes a metaphor and a symbol for Karintha and the meaning of her life. Similarly, the poem "Portrait in Georgia" objectifies the story of Esther into a precise and intense image: "... her slim body, white of the ash/of black flesh after flame" (50). These lines compact a mixture of Esther's near-white skin and the rage of her sexual fantasies, both of which have caused her unhappiness and repression of sexual desire. Also, the poems in section one are arranged symmetrically with two poems between each story. In section two, either two poems, two sketches, or a poem and a sketch precede each story. The poems use a variety of traditional forms such as a sonnet, quatrain, octave, and African chant. Toomer's virtuosity with prosody is demonstrated by his skillful handling of each of the poems. They cover an entire range of mood and feeling. Within each poem, as within the stories and other elements of _Cane_, are various images and symbols. Spread throughout _Cane_, the imagery and symbolism in these elements form the basis of its language and meaning.

Each of these sections complements the movement of three separate major themes which form an unconventional three-part thematic structure. In a 1922 letter to Waldo Frank, Toomer disclosed the

organization and movement of these major themes:

> From three angles, Cane's design is a circle. Aesthetically, from simple forms to complex ones, and back to simple forms. Regionally from South up to North, and back into South again. Or, from the North down into South, and then a return North. From the point of view of the spiritual entity behind the work, the curve really starts with Bona and Paul (awakening), plunges into Kabnis, emerges in Karintha, etc., swings upward into Theater and Box Seat and ends (pauses) in Harvest Song.[2]

These "angles" or themes--aesthetic, regional, spiritual--begin and end at different points in Cane. The aesthetic theme, which reveals and contrasts the physical and spiritual essence of the folk culture, begins with "Karintha" and ends with "Kabnis." The regional theme, which contrasts the simple life and environment of Georgia with the urban jungle of the modern city, can begin with "Karintha" or "Bona and Paul" and end with either "Kabnis" or "Box Seat." The spiritual theme, which portrays the search for identity and self by a collective personality, begins and ends as described by Toomer's letter.

The aesthetic theme contains proportions of the epic because Cane is the poetic record of dwindling folk culture which began in Africa, was altered by slavery in America, and is being destroyed by the civilized, but alienated, condition of modern man. Beginning with "simple forms," section one of Cane unfolds the lives of six rural females in Georgia. Disoriented and pathetic, these women are the sad remainders of a folk culture which has all but disappeared except for traces of song, superstition, religion, and myth.[3] Because most of the folk culture is lost, their lives do not have the universal social framework which existed for their pagan ancestors. Their position in the world is no longer as objects of love or as symbols of fertility, but

as objects of men's lust. These Georgia women lead similar, unfulfilled lives like those of their female counterparts in the city.

Also in the first section are a series of poems which reveal the aesthetic of the folk culture. "Reapers," a naturalistic portrait of the harvest, emphasizes the natural organic relationship between the folk culture, the soil, and nature. The images of the reapers, scythes, horses, rat, weeds, and shade are portrayed together equally on the whole canvas. The scene of the rat cut by the scythe evokes in the reader a feeling of sympathy and disgust; however, the narrator objectively keeps moving with the blade and leaves the rat to his untimely fate. The reapers are not necessarily devoid of feeling for the rat; there are no feelings given. The implications of the poem are that the reapers and therefore the other members of the folk culture are so much a part of their environment that they exist in mind, body, and spirit almost at the animal level, a suggestion which should not be taken pejoratively. Therefore, ignoring the dying rat, the reapers go about their business of survival--the harvest.

Moving to "complex forms" in "Seventh Street," the second section of Cane objectifies the effects of modern civilization on the descendants of the folk culture who have migrated North with the hope of finding a more "prosperous" life. Their lives become quagmires of corrupted, unnatural feelings and emotions. Concentrating on a series of abortive relationships between men and women, section two emphasizes the impossibility of the folk culture to survive, and therefore of men to find hope of happiness within the confinement of the modern industrial jungle. Because modern civilization is complex, the communal values of the folk culture are either abandoned or complicated by new values and desires:

money instead of love, social position instead of companionship and brotherhood.

Returning to "simple forms" in "Kabnis," _Cane_ exemplifies the mid-point of transition from folk to city life: Sempter, a small southern town, emphasizes the break-up of the culture of the canefields and shows the first tentative steps toward modern civilization. In "Kabnis" the aesthetic theme comes full circle by presenting character portraits which by varying degrees represent the movement toward the city: Halsey, Layman, and Hanby, who compromise values of honesty and human feeling to gain security in the white community, represent the dissolution of the folk culture. Lewis, Father John, and Carry K., who embrace values of compassion and love, represent the folk culture's living spirit. Between these extremes is Ralph Kabnis, a neurotic poet, and a man without an identity. Although he is the central character of the story, Carry K. and Father John are the focal points of the aesthetic theme's close. Carry K. and Father John attempt to preserve the folk culture's values: she by acts of compassion, love and charity; and he, a reticent, living symbol of a forgotten slave past, by not compromising his position as the preacher or spiritual leader of his people. Carry K. and Father John receive an affirmative symbolic sign of grace when they become encircled in a "soft circle" (239) of light. Here the aesthetic theme ends. In a sense, Carry K. and Father John are doomed because the folk culture and its values are becoming things of the past. However, their unflagging determination to endure the sorrow of their lives without compromising basic human values of love and compassion gives them nobility and dignity--qualities not associated with any group in _Cane_ other than the folk culture.

The regional theme portrays the environment of the southern and northern folk culture.[4] Of the three major themes, the regional is the lesser, and it serves mainly as a contrast to and follows the thematic movements of the aesthetic and spiritual themes. The Georgia scene is pictured as having a lazy, unchanging, timeless beauty; it is characterized by various natural objects and human landmarks, all of which have associative value with the folk culture and its heritage of slavery. These objects and landmarks contribute toward the total vision which the folk culture has of the world; the folk culture of Georgia, who are closer in mind and spirit to the old folk culture with its myths and superstitions, attach symbolic value to each object, event, or person, each of which has a "living" universal quality. The city environment of section two, which contrasts sharply with the Georgia countryside, has its own related objects and landmarks which portray the city's confinement and sterility for the folk culture through material objects.

The spiritual theme, which portrays the endless search for identity by the collective personality, does not fall within the distinct framework of the three sections. It begins, following Toomer's guidelines in his letter to Frank, with "Bona and Paul," moves clockwise through <u>Cane</u>, and ends or "pauses" at "Harvest Song." Although there is an awareness of a broad spiritual search or yearning throughout <u>Cane</u>, the only structural clues that the theme begins at "Bona and Paul" are the small half-circles found on the divider pages between sections one and two, and sections two and three, and the maturing plant imagery which starts with "Bona and Paul" (". . .green blades sprouting in his consciousness" [145]), continues in "Kabnis" (". . .soil-soaked

beauty, uprooted, thinning out" [191]), and climaxes in "Box Seat" ("He is as cool as a green stem that has just shed its flower" [129]).

A portrait of the collective personality is perceived most clearly through various male characters and narrators of different stories and poems. Some of the outstanding figures of the collective personality are Paul Johnson, Ralph Kabnis, the narrator of "Fern," the narrator of "Avey," the narrator of "Beehive," John in "Theater," the narrator of "Her Lips Are Copper Wire," Dan Moore, and the narrator of "Prayer." All of the figures of the collective personality share the same neurotic, intellectual, alienated, passive-lustful, and artistic-prophetic thoughts. All have a common desire to find out who they are and what they can identify with. Throughout Cane, the various figures of the collective personality engage in role playing, since the first part of their search is oriented toward finding an external self. By the end of the cycle, the collective personality abandons contact with external reality, moves inside itself, and begins a new search for an integration of its own mind, body, and soul.

Beginning with "Bona and Paul," the "awakening" of Paul's artistic thoughts also reveals to him his thoughts about himself as a human being. With his declaration that he will gather rose and dusk petals to know himself, Paul marks the beginning of a spiritual search for identity on the part of the collective personality. However, his choice to pursue a search for himself results in Bona's rejection of him. Her rejection marks the beginning of a series of rejections by all of the women connected with the collective personality. The hopeful optimism of Paul is shadowed by the failure for which he is responsible in his relationship with Bona. The beginning of the tragedy of the modern mind, the impossibility of love, has begun.

Moving to "Kabnis," the spiritual theme presents a character who is at the crossroads of a spiritual and intellectual crisis: Ralph Kabnis, a light-skinned, educated, northern Negro, finds himself in Georgia confronted with a slave heritage and ancestry. In his opinion, Kabnis feels that identity with slavery means identity with Negroes, connections which he abhors for two reasons: one is clearly a matter of status in a white-oriented society: "My ancestors were Southern blue-bloods" (217), the other is his hatred and the shame of being the product of miscegenation: "The earth my mother. God is a profligate red-nosed man about town. Bastardy; me" (161). Compounding these psychological difficulties for Kabnis is his desire to be an artist and create. However, he knows that the inability to accept and identify with his Negro culture and slave heritage is also an inability to accept and identify with his inner self. For Kabnis, the integration of his inner self means the possibility of an objective and uninhibited artistic vision:

> If I, the dream (not what is weak and afraid in me) could become the face of the South. How my lips would sing for it, my songs being the lips of its soul. (158)

Kabnis also has problems with women. For example, he can arouse sexual feelings only when he is drunk, and he expresses no desire to form relationships with either Cora, Stella, or Carry K. However, early in the story he lovingly addresses an imaginary woman: "Near me. Now. Whoever you are, my own glowing sweetheart. . ." (158). This "female" is Kabnis's muse; the entire soliloquy he delivers to her is a prayer asking for artistic inspiration. However, Kabnis cannot have his "sweet-heart" because she, like the knowledge of himself which he fervently desires, will remain always frustratingly elusive. Thus Kabnis's pursuit

of the artist role has only intensified his alienated condition. It has also pushed him farther from a relationship with any of "Kabnis's" females, each of whom bear the burden of a loveless and unfulfilled life.

Coming from "Kabnis" to the sensuous beauty of section one, the reader might assume that Kabnis has been able to fit his "dream" onto the "bull-neck" of the world by rendering the beauty of the South into art. The stories, poems, songs, and epigraphs are told by a nameless narrator who throughout the section expresses a richness of mood and feeling. Contrasting with the introspective soul-searching of Paul Johnson and Kabnis, the narrator dwells on externals and his feelings about the people and environment. His attitude is characterized by a loving empathy with the departing folk culture. His feelings are perfectly expressed in "Song of the Son" (21). As the cotton flower becomes significant for the "old folks," the plum tree in "Song of the Son" becomes the image from which the narrator builds his songs (poems, stories) of the slaves. Returning as "thy son," the narrator declares his intentions of capturing the "plaintive soul" of the parting slave culture. His reasons are two-fold. First, he seeks to preserve the "song-lit race of slaves" before they are lost forever; second, he wishes to sing about the "souls of slavery" to himself so that he may contemplate the meaning of "what they are to me."

Most of section one is essentially a demonstration of human suffering. From the spiritual agony of the enslaved African in "Conversion" to the intense sexual repression of the near-white Esther, the stories and poems reflect an entire range of human misery. The collective personality emerges briefly in "Becky" and "Carma," and more prominently in "Fern."

With Fern, the narrator displays the same lustful impulses which plague several of the collective personality's figures, and which consequently cut them off from any meaningful relationships with women. These impulses stem from the fact that the only "natural" feelings which the collective personality has are its libido instincts. The narrator throughout the story portrays the timeless beauty of Fern, who he implies is a symbolic embodiment of the well of human suffering: "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 feeling when I follow the curves of her profile, like mobile rivers, to their common delta" (24). As long as he describes Fern as an object of beauty and keeps his "aesthetic" distance, the narrator is free to love her much in the same way Kabnis loves his "sweetheart." However, when his mind perceives her as an object of his own subconscious lust ("I must have done something--what, I dont know, in the confusion of my emotion. She sprang up" [32]) he loses both Fern and his artistic vision. Again, the collective personality is rejected, not for insincerity, but for lovelessness.

Section two intensifies the collective personality's search for self. Having moved away from the pain and suffering of the South, it encounters the pain and suffering of the North. It begins a gradual movement into itself. In "Avey," the collective personality again assumes the role of artist, believing that it can produce "an art that would be born, an art that would open the way for women the likes. . ." (87) of Avey. However, Avey, like all of _Cane_'s women, is unfulfilled. Her exposure to modern civilization has stripped her of any desire to be fulfilled. The narrator, hoping to motivate Avey and fill her with hope, sings her a "promise-song." The result of his efforts, however, only dulls her, rather than

arousing her deeper feelings and emotions. The narrator, who has pursued the elusive Avey since childhood, is unable to consummate his desire for his "sweetheart" because she falls asleep. The final image of Avey in the narrator's lap (he thinks he is manfully protecting her) is sharply inverted by the last phrase of the story, "Orphan-woman. . ." (88). An "orphan-woman" is a traditional figure in Negro folk culture who takes in homeless children. Thus, the narrator is homeless, without identity, and still without a muse-mother's love. Like Cloine who "dreams" (35), Avey, because she cannot have fulfillment with the narrator, finds solace in sleep.

In "Beehive," the narrator, tired of his endless "Lying on my back/ Lipping honey" (89), wishes to escape from the beehive, a symbolic communal home. Like the consequences of the search begun by Paul Johnson, the narrator turns his back on human relationships in order to pursue his quest for self. He wishes to abandon his non-productive "drone" role and escape to a "farmyard flower," a symbiotic partner of Bees. However, the narrator is a drone and can never carry pollen nor produce honey; he is unproductive and therefore non-fulfilling, a quality associated with the lovelessness of the collective personality. Although he is the "natural" mating partner of the queen bee, he desires to escape from his responsibilities to her.

In "Theater" the collective personality moves closer to a break with external reality. John separates his mind from his body and attempts to analyze the backgrounds of the dance group. His subsequent thoughts about Dorris take flight and dwell on the possibility of a sexual relationship with her. However, he passively stays in his daydream. Ironically his fantasy cuts off the reality of her offered relationship,

a relationship offered by her sensual "mating" dance for him. Dorris, who desires a home and children, rejects him when she "looks quick at John. His whole face is in shadow. She seeks for her dance in it. She finds it a dead thing in the shadow which is his dream" (100). John is tragic because he purposely dwells in his thoughts, like the drone bee, to avoid her reality.

The sense of the tragic associated with the collective personality's endless search for self begins to take form in "Her Lips Are Copper Wire" (101), a parody of Shakespeare's parody of Petrarchan conceits, "My Mistresses Eyes Are Nothing Like The Sun." Although the parody seems humorous, the narrator's conceit of communications equipment is actually a plea by the collective personality for human communication. The poem's images break down into two groups: those describing the isolated nature of the poet, and those describing what the narrator wishes the woman whom he is addressing to do for him. The narrator admits that he is mechanical with no feelings; he pleads for her to save him; her kiss, he says, will revive him. Significantly, the collective personality has now turned to a woman for love. However, there is no longer a willing "Dorris" who will give herself to him. The poem is highly artificial (as a good conceit should be) but very real to the narrator who has become locked inside himself.

The spiritual theme partly closes in "Box Seat" with Dan Moore's dramatic renunciation of man's inhumanity to man and role playing in search of self. Compared to a "new-world Christ" (119), Dan Moore emphasizes the collective personality's new conception of itself as a prophet: "Stir the root-life of a withered people" (104). However, unable to form a renewed relationship with Muriel who rejects him, Dan exposes his inability to form relationships with anyone. In the

climactic scene at the Lincoln Theater, Dan achieves the final step which the collective personality takes to break away "forever in some far-off farmyard flower." He identifies with the suffering of the dwarf and this identification becomes the key to his freedom from his external role playing. For a brief moment, the collective personality has had a sense of self. Thus, the story implies that through suffering men share a common identity.

In the scene at the Lincoln Theater following the brutal fight between two dwarfs, Dan observes Muriel thoughtfully as the victorious dwarf offers her a white rose. The rose's original connotation--a symbol of either the Virgin or love between a knight and his lady--is parodied by the scene between Muriel and the dwarf. _Cane_'s explicit point here is that the folk culture has displaced its symbols for the sterile and morally bankrupt symbols of modern culture. As a purity symbol, the rose becomes a "bloodstained" mockery of itself. The audience unconsciously applauds the rose's deeper implications--that their original suffering in slavery is on the "blood-stained" hands of whites: "Mr. Barry offers Muriel the rose. The house applauds" (127).

Up to this point, Dan Moore has grown more inwardly disturbed by the brutality of the fight scene and Muriel's behavior. The climax of his repressed thoughts occurs when he chooses between Muriel, the object of his lust, and the dwarf, the object of his latent humanity. The story has carefully built up the picture of Muriel's disgust with the dwarf's ugliness. When the dwarf offers her the rose, he silently pleads with her through his eyes,

> Do not shrink. Do not be afraid of me.
> _Jesus_

See how my eyes look at you.
the Son of God
I too was made in His image.
was once--
I give you the rose. (128)

The dwarf's thoughts are a plea for compassion and love. Regardless of the imperfections of the rose, it is sincerely offered by the dwarf with the hope that Muriel will accept him as a human being. She almost faints as she reaches for the rose because she must touch the dwarf to get it. However, she accepts it as a concession to convention. None of this is lost on Dan Moore (whose thoughts fall in italics between the dwarf's thoughts), who realizes the reasons for her disgust and hypocrisy. Unable to contain his inner rage any longer, he jumps up and shouts, "JESUS WAS ONCE A LEPER" (129).

Dan's symbolic cry recalls that at one time both Jesus and his message of love and compassion were rejected, just as the dwarf and his plea are rejected by Muriel. Dan draws an analogy between the treatment of Christ and the treatment of lepers. Both were rejected spiritually and physically. He implies in the analogy a reminder that Jesus had love and compassion for lepers (and presumably dwarfs). Dan, "as cool as a green stem that has just shed its flower" (129), rejects his self-chosen, external prophet role and leaves the theater. The collective personality then moves inside itself. This movement inward is entirely consistent with imagery in "Bona and Paul" which shows the sun as it draws across the sky, pulling Paul's vision in a circular motion from the objective scene of Chicago to the imaginary scene in Georgia and back subjectively "into himself" (138). The poem, "Prayer," which follows "Box Seat," fits neatly into the cycle by adding a new search by the now submerged collective personality.

In "Prayer," the narrator's mind and body are portrayed as divorced and closed off from his soul, which he feels gives his life meaning and identity. His spirits, which give him his initial life drive, push both his body and mind into "giving" (131) and the "desire to give more." However, he wants to know why he is being driven and what his function is. It seems as if his soul is determined to stay closed to him. Therefore, he relies on the will of the body--sex--thinking that it is his motivating force. However, he knows that his body is weak; whereas, his soul (whatever it is) is strong. He feels that his longing to know and understand himself will never be satisfied because the answers to his questions are as remote as the "stars." The internal problem elaborated in "Prayer" focuses the strivings for identity begun by Paul Johnson's search to "know himself." Since it is the last direct statement by the collective personality in _Cane_, the implication that the search is endless is finalized.

"Harvest Song" is _Cane_'s expression of the folk mind which is unaware of its own dissolution. Interestingly, the form is African chant; however, the speaker is a Georgia Negro. The poem implies that the harvester has been out off from the mythic frame of his own thinking. The harvest is now nothing but work to him; whereas before his loss, the harvest was a source of life and joy and a communion with his "brothers" (133) who were all bound together by the soil; now they are separated by the drudgery of toil. The harvester's mind is not sophisticated and therefore does not understand what has happened to itself. Physical hunger obviously is not a source of his sorrow because there is nothing to indicate the failure of the crop. Instead, he "hungers" for knowledge of why the harvest is no longer significant

to him, but he fears this knowledge because he suspects it will only confirm his awareness that he has lost his culture and therefore his soul.

The connection of "Harvest Song" with "Prayer" is obvious. The harvester and the narrator both seek their "souls"; both are "driven of the spirit" and are weak from "giving"; both suffer from a lack of knowledge about their ailments. The narrator lacks knowledge of his identity and purpose; the harvester lacks knowledge of the cause of his emotional hunger, and he suspects that his identity and purpose are dying. There is the feeling that for the harvester this will be the last harvest; and that the harvester, like the narrator, will die without knowing what his "hunger" was.

As with the stories and poems, *Cane*'s extended imagery and symbolism form important patterns which complement *Cane*'s themes and meaning. Most of the symbols in *Cane* are associated with the aesthetic and regional themes. Like a color spectrum, *Cane*'s images and symbols move by degree away from the world of the folk culture toward modern civilization and eventual disintegration. As the folk culture disintegrates and loses its values and vitality, the symbols lose their importance and richness. Without human value, these symbols become materialistic and insignificant to the folk culture.

Cane's central unifying symbol, the cane plant, is significant for its highly suggestive qualities. These qualities of the cane symbol are contained in the little inscription on the title page:

> Oracular.
> Redolent of fermenting syrup,

Purple of the dusk,
Deep-rooted cane. (iii)

This inscription is like an epitaph left for a posterity which might otherwise never know what it has lost. In these brief lines, Toomer compacts the world of human feeling and meaning which he believes is passing away.

An analogy between the poetic qualities of the cane and the qualities of the folk culture is the core out of which _Cane_ emerges. "Oracular" suggests the sense of illusion which is the foundation of the folk mind. Also, it extends throughout _Cane_'s religious atmosphere and into the imagery of prophecy which connects characters such as King Barlo and Father John. "Redolent" is a product of the natural biological process of "fermenting syrup." In _Cane_, this process symbolically relates to the artist's creative mind in _Cane_, and to its images of lovemaking: redolence, a sweet smell, suggests love; fermenting syrup suggests sex. Lovemaking outside of the folk culture does not exist because there is no love attached to the sexual activities. In the folk culture, love and sex are one. "Purple," the most prominent color in _Cane_, is a color used in religious rites as a recognition of mourning and suffering. In _Cane_, purple is associated with the brotherhood of suffering symbolized by slavery. In _Cane_'s color spectrum, a movement away from purple towards a lighter color symbolizes a movement away from the folk culture. "Dusk" is a result of the setting sun and also a warning of coming night. In _Cane_, dusk suggests the fading of slavery and the folk culture. Also, much of _Cane_'s significant action takes place at dusk. "Deep-rooted cane" is an image of the inseparable union between the cane plant and the earth. It suggests the close identity which the folk

culture has with itself and with nature. The collective personality is attracted to this sense of identity found in the folk culture. Finally, the inscription words associate the folk culture with the five senses: oracular--hearing, redolent--smell, fermenting syrup--taste, purple and dusk--sight, and deep-rooted cane--touch. All of the qualities of the cane plant are suggested in one form or another throughout Cane's imagery.

Sections one and three contain images and symbols associated with the folk culture in the Georgia countryside. Although Cane's Georgia is a symbol of man's existence in nature, the images and symbols of the countryside reflect particular characteristics of Georgia. Section two contains images and symbols associated with the folk culture in the city. They represent the distance that the folk culture has traveled toward disintegration and dissolution. Common characteristics of the city become symbols of escape into the mind, sterility, and symbols of divorce from the life-giving environment of the country and nature.

The predominant vegetation imagery in Georgia is symbolic of the folk culture's link to the soil, to nature, and to its slave past. Cane, corn, cotton, rice, and other cultivated crops are the symbolic sources of the folk culture's labor and union with the earth and nature. Also, these cultivated crops which existed in the South during slavery are a link with the folk culture's slave past. Cane's primary earth symbol is the red-clay soil. It gives life to the cane and therefore to the folk culture. It is also another link with the slave past which is present in soil images such as "Through the cracks, a powdery faded red dust sprays down on him. Dust of slave-fields, dried, scattered. . ."

(159). The harvest of these crops is the symbolic completion of the cycle which begins with the planting of the crop fields. It is a significant time when the folk culture joins in a brotherhood of labor, a source of joy and communal feeling with their fellow man. The tragedy revealed in the poem "Harvest Song" is the folk culture's loss of the harvest brotherhood.

Contrasting with the cultivated order of the crop fields, the ever-present pines in Cane are symbolic of the vital relationship between a wild but benevolent nature and mankind. As suggested by the poem "Nullo," pine needles have a symbolic significance in Cane. When Karintha bears her child alone in the forest (universe), the pine needles (nature) become Karintha's and the child's midwife:

> A child fell out of her womb onto a bed of pine-needles in the forest. Pine-needles are smooth and sweet. They are elastic to the feet of rabbits. . . (4)

These lines suggest the naturalness, beauty, and universiality of childbirth. However, Karintha gives up the child, which is a result of her "playing" when the "soul of her was a growing thing ripened too soon" (4): she has had sex and a child before she knew what "loving" (2) really is. In the nearby sawmill, a symbolic vehicle for destroying pine trees, Karintha buries her child in a "pyramidal sawdust pile" (4). The pile, which constantly smoulders, suggests a sacrificial pyre which is Karintha's source of atonement. The folksong which follows the incident of Karintha's child tells of its wish that the soul ("smoke") of the baby will be returned to nature, or to "Jesus":

> Weeks after Karintha returned home the smoke was so heavy you tasted it in water. Some one made a song:

> Smoke is on the hills. Rise up.
> Smoke is on the hills, O rise
> And take my soul to Jesus. (4)

The implications of Karintha's tragedy extend throughout Cane, and therefore to the modern world. A child, a product of nature, has no meaning in the universe unless it is also a product of love. Through love, human reproduction, and therefore existence, is made meaningful. If sex exists without love, then sex, and therefore mankind, exists without meaning. Thus, Karintha's symbolic acts become an extension of the message of "Nullo": unlike the "rabbits," Karintha "knows" of her child's "falling" and recognizes the significance of her child of sex and not of love. All of the men-women relationships symbolically fail in Cane because sex and not love exists in the modern world. Although women are portrayed as unfulfilled but willing love-partners, men are portrayed symbolically as incapable of loving--a tragic condition of the modern mind.

The Georgia moon symbolically embodies the sense of illusion which is part of the folk culture. To the narrator of "Blood-Burning Moon," the red moon is symbolic of rage or murder. However, to Cane's superstitious folk minds, the moon becomes a prophetic projection of their own fears. When Tom Burwell is lynched and burned, the images of his death become the base for Louisa's understanding of the event:

> Ghost of a yell slipped through the flames and out the great door of the factory. . . . Louisa, upon the step before her home, did not hear it, but her eyes opened slowly. They saw the full moon glowing in the great door. The full moon, an evil thing, an omen, soft showering the homes of folks she knew. (67)

Louisa sees her lover Burwell in flames. To her superstitious perception of things, the fire "assumes significance." She transfers mentally

what she knows and fears (Burwell's death) to the moon, an inanimate, but symbolic object which then becomes "an evil thing, an omen." Louisa's song which ends the story is her effort to combat the influence of the omen over "the homes of folks she knew":

> Red nigger moon. Sinner!
> Blood-burning moon. Sinner!
> Come out that fact'ry door. (67)

Similar to the intentions of the song about Karintha's child, Louisa's song also wishes for the soul of Tom Burwell to be released.

A source of imagery in Georgia which connects symbolically the folk culture to its African and slave past is found in Cane's religious atmosphere. Religion is an important culture carrier as are, for example, songs or tales. When the folk culture moves into modern civilization, it becomes separated from religion. The consequence of this separation for the folk culture is the loss of a source of feeling. In a letter to Waldo Frank, Toomer declared about the Negro folk culture:

> There is one thing about the Negro in America which most thoughtful persons seem to ignore: the Negro is in solution, in the process of solution. As an entity, the race is losing its body, and its soul is approaching a common soul. . . . if anything comes up now, pure Negro, it will be a swan song. Don't let us fool ourselves, brother: the Negro of the folk-song has all but passed away: the Negro of the emotional church is fading.[5]

The source of the folk culture's religion begins with a pagan past, and not with Christianity, which was adopted during slavery. W. E. B. DuBois stresses the African origins of the Negro folk culture's religion and also relates the function of the spiritual leader:

> . . . his realm alone--the province of religion and medicine--remained largely unaffected by the plantation system in many important particulars. . . . [he] early became an important figure on the plantation and found his function as the interpreter

> of the supernatural, the comforter of the sorrowing, as the one who expressed, rudely but picturesquely, the longing and disappointment and resentment of a stolen people.[6]

In Cane, the spiritual leader, symbolized by King Barlo and Father John, acts as the trigger to emotional release from suffering. Both Barlo and Father John are central to the folk culture's sense of illusion. Symbolically, they articulate and guide the superstitions, fears, and hopes of the folk culture. King Barlo's magnificent sermon in "Esther" brings forth the group's repressed identity with Africa, slavery, and suffering. When he states that he has "a vision" (38), Barlo is performing the ancient function of prophecy, suggested by the inscription word "Oracular." By the end of his sermon about freedom from bondage and suffering, Barlo becomes, in the group's eyes, the living image of the "black an powerful" (38) man he has been describing: Barlo "is immense. To the people he assumes the outlines of his visioned African" (39). Shortly after Barlo's sermon, the rapid transference of the folk culture's feelings of sorrow to joy results in a burst of wild folk myths about Barlo. These myths testify to Barlo's power to make the folk mind forget its sorrow and "dream." The myths relate

> That hosts of angels and of demons paraded up and down the streets all night. That King Barlo rode out of town astride a pitch-black bull that had a glowing gold ring in its nose. And that old Limp Underwood, who hated niggers, woke up next morning to find that he held a black man in his arms. (39-40)

Father John, "Dead blind father of a muted folk" (212), is used to symbolize the impending death of the spiritual-leader role. In "Kabnis," Father John is reduced to an object of mockery and

insignificance. Even Lewis,who understands what Father John is, cannot save him. Father John's last and only cry, "O th sin th white folks 'mitted when they made th Bible lie" (237), symbolizes his spiritual agony at discovering that he misled his people. His cry implies that whites admitted their sin against Moses, symbol of freedom from bondage, and Jesus, symbol of healing and brotherhood, when they committed slavery. By slavery, whites made the Moses and Jesus symbols, which Father John and consequently his people believed, a lie. Discovery of the lie is the hammer which breaks Father John's sense of illusion, and therefore, his function as spiritual leader. His inability to move the suffering but incredulous Kabnis illustrates the spiritual leader's ultimate loss of power.

The spiritual-leader is the only exception to the group's sense of self. However, although he performs apart from the group, he is nevertheless one of them. In the spiritual search for identity by the collective personality, several characters assume spiritual-leader roles, for example, artist or prophet roles. However, these characters are unable to function in these roles because they are totally alienated from and cannot identify with any group, including the human race. Their tragedy, and modern man's, is the inability to feel. The consequence of this inability sterilizes their otherwise good intentions. Although the narrator of "Fern" recognizes Fern's suffering through her eyes--in _Cane_, eyes are symbolic windows to the soul--he can only wish for "Something I would do for her. Some fine unnamed thing. . ." (33). The "unnamed thing"--love--which would bind the narrator to Fern, and therefore to his fellow man, is tragically beyond his grasp. When the narrator states that Fern's eyes "Held God" (32), he recognizes

that she embodies the universe of human feeling of which the narrator has no part. Like modern man, he cannot feel love. Like the search for identity, the collective personality's self-chosen roles are frustratingly endless and meaningless.

The associations which the images and symbols of rural Georgia evoke suggest a communion and a bond among the folk culture and a vital relationship with nature. For the folk culture, these associations have natural and religious connotations: natural in that the folk culture is closely linked to the environment by its emotions, feelings, and senses; religious in that the meaning of life is revealed to the folk culture by an environment which it feels invested with symbolic and mythic overtones.

The images and symbols of section two suggest the destruction, corruption, and sterility of the folk culture as it moves into the modern world and dissolution. The mythic "goat path in Africa" (18) and the dusty "Dixie Pike" (18) in Georgia become Seventh Street:

> . . . a bastard of Prohibition and the War.
> A crude-boned, soft-skinned wedge of nigger
> life breathing its loafer air, jazz songs and
> love, thrusting unconscious rhythms, black
> reddish blood into the white and whitewashed
> wood of Washington. . . . Who set you flowing? (71)

The narrator's rhetorical question suggests that the folk culture will have a certain vibrancy, whether it is in Georgia or in Washington. However, Seventh Street is a loveless symbol which suggests miscegenation --"bastard of Prohibition and the War." Prohibition, era of speakeasies and "fast" money, corrupted much of the folk culture's city life by fostering prostitution and related vices; the war (World War I) brought thousands of servicemen to Seventh Street for its associated "pleasures."

The prevailing symbol for the movement into self away from the group is the box image.[7] For example, houses are pictured as retreats from "nigger" life. Rhobert's house symbolizes the destructiveness on the folk mind of its movement into itself:

> Rhobert wears a house, like a monstrous diver's helmet, on his head. His legs are banty-bowed and shaky because as a child he had rickets. He is way down. (73)

By mentioning Rhobert's rickets, the narrator suggests that Rhobert has had an early life of suffering due to poverty. Therefore Rhobert has a psychological reason for wanting material security in the form of a "house." However, as a consequence of his inward movement, he loses concern about human beings close to him: ". . . he cares not two straws as to whether he will ever see his wife and children again" (74). By wearing a house like a "monstrous diver's helmet," Rhobert hopes to insulate himself from the pain and suffering that life has caused him. However, by insulating himself from suffering, he insulates himself from life and his fellow man. Appropriately, the narrator asks for a monument "of hewn oak, carved in nigger-heads" (75) to commemorate Rhobert as a formal symbol for the folk culture's loss of their sense of brotherhood and feeling for others.

In "Box Seat," the seats become symbols for loss of human values. A person is described as

> . . . a bolt that shoots into a slot, and is locked there. . . . The seats are slots. The seats are bolted houses. The mass grows denser. Its weight at first is impalpable upon the box. Then Muriel begins to feel it. (117)

A person, like a bolt, can be made to conform to certain standards to work as part of a machinery. In Cane, conformity with "the mass" becomes the symbolic threat to the folk culture's identity with itself. Giving

way to demands of conformity, as demonstrated in "Box Seat," implies that the folk culture has broken up as a unique group.

In modern civilization, the loss of the natural abundance of song is symbolic of the folk culture's loss of feeling. There are no songs in section two. The mythical union between the subject of the song and the singer is missing. In place of the native song--the jukebox. When Dan Moore tries to sing to "houses" which he sees as "shy girls" (105), he finds that

> His voice is a little hoarse. It cracks.
> He strains to produce tones in keeping
> with the houses' loveliness. Cant be done.
> He whistles. His notes are shrill. They
> hurt him. (104-105)

The theater is a symbol of the folk culture's final disintegration and loss of values. In "Theater," John laments that the dancers, by submitting like cattle to vulgar, unnatural dance movements, deny their natural body motion which in "Carma" is described as "a song" (17). John thinks,

> Soon the director will herd you, my full-lipped,
> distant beauties, and tame you, and blunt
> your sharp thrusts in loosely suggestive
> movements, appropriate to Broadway. (92-93)

Similarly, in "Box Seat," the theater becomes the center of a spectacle of human debasement. The audience, portrayed as "respectable" society, applauds the brutal fight between two dwarfs:

> The house pounds. Cut lips. Bloody noses.
> The referee asks for the gong. Time!
> The house roars. The dwarfs bow, are made
> to bow. The house wants more. (125)

When violence such as lynching occurs in Georgia, the folk culture's reaction to it is fear. However, in the city, lessons of brutality and suffering are forgotten or repressed. The folk culture, much

altered, shows that it has become as heartless as a spectator in a Roman Circus.

Other images of the city, such as asphalt, streetcar tracks, storm doors, and iron gates, emphasize its lifelessness and confinement. None of the images or symbols in section two have human value or meaning. The implications of the symbols suggest that if human life in modern civilization exists, it exists within the individual and not within the group. Because value is placed on objects such as "houses," it is therefore placed on the individual's inner self which he seeks to protect or wear like a "monstrous diver's helmet" against the outside world.

Notes

[1]Jean Toomer, Cane (New York, 1967), p. 34. Subsequent quotations from the text will be in parentheses.

[2]Mabel Mayle Dillard, Jean Toomer: Herald of the Harlem Renaissance (an unpublished dissertation, Ohio State University, 1967), p. 76.

[3]Dillard's study of Cane has a complete discussion of the stories. Although I do not agree with most of her conclusions, her handling of several of the women characters is excellent.

[4]Similarly, Dillard has an adequate discussion of the elements which make up Cane's regional theme.

[5]Dillard, p. 19.

[6]W. E. B. DuBois, The Negro Church (Atlanta, 1903), p. 5.

[7]Dillard considers the box image to be a confinement symbol in the sense that she feels Negroes are confined or "held down" by modern society.

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