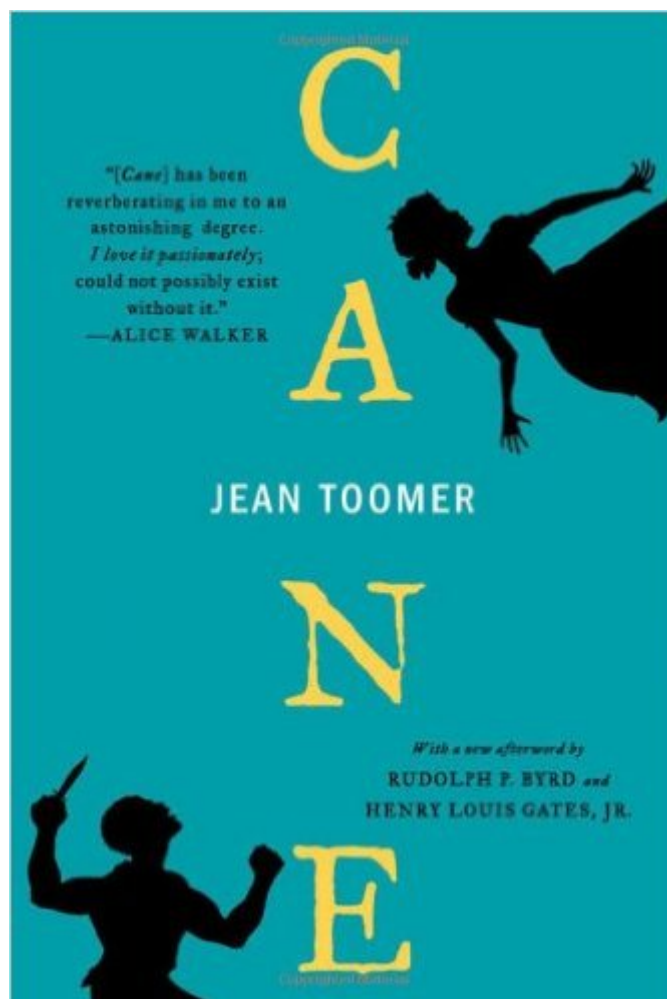


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Cane (New Edition)



Synopsis

•A breakthrough in prose and poetical writing. . . . This book should be on all readers' and writers' desks and in their minds. •Maya Angelou First published in 1923, Jean Toomer's *Cane* is an innovative literary work •part drama, part poetry, part fiction •powerfully evoking black life in the South. Rich in imagery, Toomer's impressionistic, sometimes surrealistic sketches of Southern rural and urban life are permeated by visions of smoke, sugarcane, dusk, and fire; the northern world is pictured as a harsher reality of asphalt streets. This iconic work of American literature is published with a new afterword by Rudolph Byrd of Emory University and Henry Louis Gates Jr. of Harvard University, who provide groundbreaking biographical information on Toomer, place his writing within the context of American modernism and the Harlem Renaissance, and examine his shifting claims about his own race and his pioneering critique of race as a scientific or biological concept.

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Customer Reviews

Alice Walker once said of *Cane* that she "could not possibly exist without it." I feel the same way. This is the most glorious, complex, heartwrenchingly beautiful collection of poems and prose that I have ever encountered. Toomer was a lyrical, insightful writer. He was someone who understood and could convey pain. Whatever racial classification people may settle upon, it is clear that Toomer was influenced by the black experience in the U.S. -- *Cane* reads like jazz sometimes, like blues at other times, and every once in awhile like gospel; in any case it is musical, rhythmic, and it gets to your soul.

Written in Post-Emancipation America, Jean Toomer's novel *Cane* represented a strong voice within the African-American community during an era where segregation was a way of life, and lynching was (in some areas of the country) an accepted means to an end. A conglomeration of images and metaphors, *Cane* is honestly a difficult text to read and should not be considered merely as an "easy" set of poems, prose, and stories. There are many intricate layers of meaning within the phrasing and style of writing. The title is a double meaning in itself. Upon hearing the title, one may think that it refers to the biblical tale of Cain and Abel. This is an important aspect since some religious Christian followers interpreted the "mark" of Cain as blackness, therefore using religion as propaganda for pro-slavery agendas. In addition, readers who are more conscious minded to the dynamics of the early 1900's concerning race relations, and its history (specifically in the South) would find this text less confusing. Some sections, which stand out within the text, are "Becky", "Song of Son", and "Blood Red Harvest".

Written back in 1923, *CANE* is one of the touchstones of African-American writing. Jean Toomer, despite his rather uncertain relationship with the African side of his ancestry, must be recognized as a founder. That said, this is a pale, difficult book, wandering sadly through the tempest-tossed fortunes of African-American life in the first decades of the 20th century. *CANE* is not for the casual reader, nor for those who want to be fed meaning. You must reflect, add to the text from your own knowledge and experience. The characters appear in pale colors, dressed in weariness and often verging on madness. Blue saxophone tones amidst the fogs of prejudice and blind hatred for all intelligent behavior by a despised minority. What more could a gentle man, human and tender, make of such craziness ? Poetry, broken images that pass slowly, pale by smoke, pale by moonlight, whisper of yellow globes, and decline of that distant hope that someday "they" would learn. Part of this book is poetry, part is prose, and part a strange play about a man named Kabnis ("Sinbad ?) who seems an unlikely traveller on life's roads. It is not a novel in any usual sense of the word, since it is made up of completely disparate parts with no connection other than that they describe the vicissitudes of African-American life in the South and in Washington DC. Plot is absent, as is continuity. This is a volume of ashen portraits, not much flattering. This is a volume worth more for its history than for its literary merit, yet it will touch you if you let it. Not yet published were the forthright descriptions and defiance of Wright, Ellison, Baldwin, and many others. The bold fulminations of Malcolm, the brilliant oratory of King---not even dreamt of. Toomer asks---but through a mist of poetic images, through the circuitous meanderings of the oppressed---what have

we done to deserve this fate? Who am I ? No firebrand he. "Wish that I might fly out past the moon/
And curl forever in some far-off farmyard flower." This is hardly rebellion. But he wrote, he dared
that. From our so-privileged vantage point of eight decades into the future shall we challenge him,
shall we scorn him ? Let's praise him, for he began the trickle that turned into a mighty flood.

There appear to be several tangled threads in *CANE* that join the three parts of the book together.
The first thread unifying the collection of poetry and prose is the way it was put together. In book
one you have the narrator observing rural negroes in the south. In book two you have the narrator
express-ing the discontent of urban negroes. Then, in book three, you have old Kabnis, a northern
negro, trying to escape his pain by returning to his roots in rural Georgia. Coming full-circle. And yet
not. Part Two should come first, with its discontented youth, then "Kabnis", then Part One. Why
does Toomer choose to progress from spiritual unity to disunity? Is it because the book truly
represents a cycle which has no beginning and no end? A clue to this is in two poems, "Reapers"
and "Harvest Song". Both are written on related topics, and yet "Reapers" is the first poem of the
book, and "Harvest Song" the last. In "Reapers" a rat is injured by a scythe, and yet "the blade,
blooded-stained, continues cutting weeds and shade" oblivious to or uncaring of the rat's injuries
and pain. In "Harvest Song" the narrator is a reaper who, at the end of the day, with his work still
unfinished, fears his own hunger so much that he distracts himself with pain, "...My pain is sweet...It
will not bring me knowledge of my hunger." What, exactly, is it that Toomer's characters hunger
for? Another thread appears to me to be the striving for unity. This desire for unity is expressed in
the ways in which the men and women in *CANE* strive toward unity in their relation-ships.
Admittedly, they fail miserably. The women in the book are terribly one-sided--sex objects that are
either passive, as with Karintha and Fern and Avey, or active, as with Carma and Louisa and Bona.
However, for all their being available physically, the females Toomer portrays in his cameos are
untouchable or out of reach spiritually. The men are also one-sided--rational and yet passionate,
often overcome by lust and rage. These probably function to demonstrate Toomer's personal views
on what men and women are, and how their desires for unity in healthy relation-ships produces a
significant amount of pain as a result of their oppositeness. Pain is yet another thread that unifies the
poetry, sketches, stories and drama of *CANE*. After all is experienced, the pain is what is left, the
only significant fruit of their struggles. In Part One, the pain everyone suffers seems to be
symbolized by the ever-present cane. The cane, which can cut the skin, must be ground, the juice
boiled and cooled, in order to obtain its sweetness. Is the pain which the characters savor the
sweetness in their lives? And if so, wouldn't the cane also represent the sweetness (pain) in their

lives? In Part Two, which takes place in the urban North, the Negroes live repressed, frustrated, and sadly warped lives. The pain is intellectualized, yet it is still there, doubly so. Is this a result of being separated from the soil--that which is perceived to be source of their spirituality--as well as their failure to form meaningful relationships? The pain in "Kabnis" is more incoherent, the pain of an urban negro who has returned to his roots only to find that he cannot accept them, is alienated by them. It is impossible to discuss all of the tangled threads that weave CANE into the powerfully moving and unorthodox novel of Toomer's voyage of self-discovery. It is often incoherent, filled with evocative recurrent images, and powerful character sketches that leave the reader unfulfilled, confused, and hungry for more. Perhaps it is Toomer's own hunger, expressed in his writing, that the reader picks up. If there was more to the novel, perhaps one could pin down the more elusive points. Then again, perhaps not.

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