JEAN TOOMER, SHERWOOD ANDERSON AND THE COMPLEXITY OF BLACK MODERN CONSCIOUSNESS

by

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(Under the Direction of Hubert H. McAlexander)

ABSTRACT

Jean Toomer and Sherwood Anderson exchanged letters for approximately two years, between 1922 and 1924. While both writers examined the effects that burgeoning American industrialism had upon humanity, Anderson, like many of his white contemporaries, insisted upon a vision of the American south as a pastoral environment free from machine age neuroses; moreover, Anderson felt that blacks living in the south were innocent primitives who did not experience the same psychological problems as those in the materialistic north. Anderson’s position on the south and blacks comes through in his correspondence with Toomer. Based on this dialogue, it is clear that Anderson took from *Cane* only what he wanted to see and ignored the fact that many of Toomer’s characters suffer the influence of industrialism that had made its way south. This thesis explores Anderson’s misunderstanding of Toomer’s book.

INDEX WORDS: Anderson, Sherwood, Toomer, Jean, Cane, Winesburg, Ohio, Correspondence, Industrialism, Machine Age, Materialism, Neuroses, Primitive, Black, African-American, American South
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1. INTRODUCTION

“I express [the emotion of the Negro]. I see myself that way. But I also see myself expressing … life.”

--Jean Toomer to Waldo Frank, late 1922 or early 1923

Having read Jean Toomer’s early stories published in *Double Dealer*, Sherwood Anderson wrote Toomer, praising him as a seminal African-American voice. Toomer did not immediately reply. But when he responded, lauding Anderson and his literary achievements, Toomer concluded, “Won’t you write and tell me more in detail how my stuff strikes you?” Their dialogue, begun in 1922, persisted throughout the early twenties, and Toomer’s *Cane* (1923) dominates much of its content. Among other things, *Cane* is Toomer’s rendering of black consciousness during America’s transition from agrarianism to industrialism. It is composed in the rhythms of black culture, urban and rural, and Toomer acknowledges his debt to Anderson, particularly to *Winesburg, Ohio*:

Just before I went down to Georgia I read Winesburg, Ohio … The beauty, the full sense of life that [this] book contain[s] are natural elements, like the rain and sunshine, of my own sprouting … It is hard to think of myself as maturing without [it].”

*Cane* similarly struck Anderson, mostly for its lyrical portrayal of the south, and, what he believed to be, its racial authenticity. In 1923, he wrote Toomer, “Your work is of special signficants to me because it is the first negro work I have seen that strikes me a
really negro.” As the late Darwin Turner points out, the “praise must have delighted Toomer,” for Anderson had already established himself as a first-rate author while Toomer had just started writing seriously.

Like Anderson, Toomer became fascinated with southern blacks of the old order: subsistence farmers who preserved folk tales, spirituals, and a communal energy unlike anything he experienced while growing up in Washington D.C. Having lived in Sparta, Georgia, for several months, Toomer presented this old order in *Cane’s* first section. But during his brief time in the south, Toomer noticed that fewer and fewer women sang their supper-getting ready songs. As American industrialism boomed in the early twentieth century, an increasing number of southerners, including African Americans, headed north for employment. The social effects were trying. Families broke apart. Rural planters left their open land for cramped urban tenements. In a letter to Waldo Frank, who wrote the introduction to the first edition of *Cane*, Toomer notes that the modern, industrialized African-American life was “jogged” and “strident.”

By the time *Cane* arrived, Anderson had already criticized the machine age. In *Poor White* (1920), Anderson characterizes the pervasiveness of industrialism as

> The roar and clatter of the breathing of the terrible new thing,

> half hideous, half beautiful in its possibilities, that was for so long to drown the voices and confuse the thinking of men.

The “roar and clatter” of a railroad line cuts right through *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), in which Anderson explores the “confused thinking” and “drowned-out voices” of Winesburg’s citizens. Thomas Yingling notes that Anderson, “like a number of others in his era … rather blindly imagined that the black culture of the south” was exempt from
industrialism’s spirit-quenching drone, that the “terrible new thing” had not reached the rural Georgia soil. Hence Anderson’s excitement upon reading several of the pieces that now comprise Cane’s first section and his enthusiastic first letter to Toomer. But Cane, like Winesburg, Ohio, devotes significant attention to the “jogged, strident, modern” world. Several of Toomer’s (black) characters experience the “confused thinking” and “drowned-out voices” that plague Anderson’s grotesques. As Anderson continually encouraged Toomer not to “let the intense white man get him”—to continue to focus on the redemptive southern soil uncontaminated by industrialism—Cane’s author seems to have grown increasingly alienated from Winesburg’s. In correspondence with Waldo Frank, Toomer suggests that Anderson’s impression of southern blacks is more fantastic than realistic. They were not a race free from the machine-age’s reach. Despite its surreal beauty, Toomer’s rural Georgia was not a pastoral utopia. Theirs is a “life, I am afraid, that Sherwood Anderson would not get his beauty of,” Toomer concluded, “for it is a “crude new life.”

The Toomer/Anderson correspondence commenced with great enthusiasm but tapered off within two years. While their mutual admiration for one another is clear in their letters, they reached an impasse. This essay will examine the machine age as reflected in Winesburg, Ohio and Cane, Anderson’s notion of Southern blacks as primitive innocents untouched by modern industry, and Toomer’s debunking of this notion. Anderson insisted upon an inaccurate understanding of black consciousness during the early twentieth century, ultimately causing the schism with Toomer. Cane offers a comprehensive racial perspective, one in which blacks not only feel the effects of
industrialism, but also struggle to find identity in the modern world and, as a result, have great difficulty realizing unity and solidarity as a race.
2. WINESBURG, OHIO AND THE MACHINE AGE

Anderson, who lived through the burgeoning American machine age, produced print advertisements for a Chicago agency during the day and wrote his stories in the evening. Regarding the stories featured in Anderson’s 1919 collection, *Winesburg, Ohio*, H.L. Mencken noted, “Here one gets all the joy that goes with the discovery of something quite new under the sun—a new order of short story, half tale and half psychological anatomizing.” Several critics have noted Anderson’s focus on Freudian psychology in *Winesburg*, particularly with respect to sexual repression. While such remarks are accurate, Anderson also examines, to an equal degree, industrialism’s effect on the human psyche. Glen A. Love argues that Anderson, “as perhaps no other writer of the twentieth century,” explored the deterioration of a “simple agrarian life” as America became an “industrialized, urban civilization of bewildering magnitude and complexity.” Winesburg, Ohio is a town in transition. Not quite agrarian or industrial, the town is home to people with agricultural roots who cannot ignore the dynamic change in America’s economy. Love suggests that they “are poised in an uneasy equilibrium between an agrarian past and the threatening industrial age ahead.” Some of Anderson’s characters embrace the change while others would like to embrace it. What is true for all is that the transition affects their mental state in negative or awkward ways. Their psychological problems are almost always associated with an intense focus upon work or an inability or unwillingness to adapt to an increasingly industrial economy. By exploring some examples, it will become clear why Anderson, who lived and worked
within the industrial north, developed such a fondness for the rural south and for *Cane* as well.

“Godliness,” *Winesburg’s* longest story, offers the most explicit critique of industrialism. The Bentley family buys cheap land near Winesburg and toils to transform the heavily wooded acreage into fertile soil. After two generations the farm becomes exceptionally fruitful when Jesse Bentley, educated in the city, returns to Winesburg as sole proprietor, his brothers having died in the Civil War and his father too old to carry on. Among the qualities Jesse Bentley develops during his university days are industry and ambition. He approaches agriculture with Carnegian fervor. Coupling human labor with machinery, “he made everyone on the farm work as they had never worked before and yet there was no joy in the work. If things went well they went well for Jesse and never for the people who were his dependents.” In his attempt “to make the farm produce as no farm in his state had ever produced before,” Jesse Bentley, who once considered becoming a Presbyterian minister, cares little for his labor-force (p. 68). In *Das Capital*, Marx, examining the effect modern industry has upon agriculture, argues, “the instrument of labor becomes the means of . . . exploiting . . . the laborer; the social combination and organization of labor-processes is turned into an organised mode of crushing out the workman’s individual vitality, freedom and independence.” Stripped of “individual vitality,” Bentley’s day-laborers know “no joy in the work.”

Bentley treats his family little better than his joyless workers. His wife is a “delicate woman,” and “Jesse was hard with her as he was with everybody about him in those days” (p. 67). She becomes pregnant, yet continues to help with farm chores while keeping the house and preparing meals for the workers. Working everyday “from sunrise
until late at night,” she finally delivers the child and dies (p. 67). So absorbed in his work, Jesse Bentley scarcely comes to know his daughter. Anderson’s narrator comments, “born of . . . an impulsive, hard, imaginative father . . . Louise was from childhood a neurotic, one of the race of over-sensitive women that in later days industrialism was to bring in such great numbers into the world” (p. 87).

Louise’s neurosis seems to stem from the isolation she first knew as a child. When she enters high school, Jesse Bentley, focused on expanding his holdings, further alienates his daughter, sending her to stay with an in-town Winesburg family, the Hardys. Mr. Hardy takes a liking to Louise, due largely to her exceptional academic performance. The two female Hardy children, unable to match Louise’s grades, become subject to Mr. Hardy’s ridicule, and, in turn, they ostracize their guest. Louise, once again isolated, spends her hours in study. Too “embarrassed and lonely,” too socially awkward to make friends, industry is her refuge (p. 89). Ironically, this fallback is precisely what contributes to her awkward condition. Like her father who ignores her, Louise essentially ignores herself. The cycle of industry and isolation continues.

Louise’s neurotic symptoms grow worse. Although she marries the Hardys’ son, David, she,

Could not be made happy. She flew into half insane fits of temper during which she was sometimes silent, sometimes noisy and quarrelsome. She swore and cried out in her anger. She got a knife from the kitchen and threatened her husband’s life. Once she deliberately set fire to the house, and often she
hid herself away for days in her own room and would see no one.

(pp. 74-5)

She is a fallen character within Anderson’s neo-Edenic paradigm. In “Godliness,” the transition from agrarianism to industrialism is synonymous with the Fall: “much of the old brutal ignorance that had in it a kind of beautiful childlike innocence is gone forever,” and vanished is a time when people “believed in God and in God’s power to control their lives” (p. 71). In a world of industry—Jesse Bentley’s world—production trumps humanity. Anderson casts Louise Hardy as a casualty of the machine age, “the most materialistic age in the history of the world . . . when the will to power would replace the will to serve and beauty would be well-nigh forgotten in the terrible headlong rush of mankind toward acquiring possessions” (p. 81). Anderson works this critique into several Winesburg tales.

Industrialism affects Winesburg in two ways. First, several characters leave their homeland for “the city,” which, justifiably, comes to symbolize adventure and unprecedented financial opportunity. Second, marks of modern industry invade Anderson’s fictional town and influence characters like Joe Welling, the “Man of Ideas.” Winesburg’s Standard Oil representative, Welling supplies retail grocers, hardware stores and the like with the petroleum, oil and lubricants Jesse Bentley and others require for their farm machines (p.104). He performs his responsibilities—bill collecting and order booking—with remarkable gusto; indeed, he is absorbed. Whenever he looks up from his order book, he awkwardly communicates messages to everyone he meets. “Pouncing” upon bystanders, “the excited man breathe[s] into [their] face[s], peer[s] into [their] eyes,
pound[s] upon [their] chest[s] with a shaking forefinger, demand[ing], compel[ing] attention” as he brings to life such topics as Wine Creek’s water level (p. 103).

On one occasion, in a rare moment of relative clarity, Joe Welling approaches the Winesburg Eagle’s sole reporter, George Willard. Taking a break from his sales route, Welling tells the newsboy, “[reporting] is what I should be doing, there is no doubt of that. Of course I make more money with the Standard Oil Company. I’ve got nothing against you, but I should have your place’” (p. 106). With machinery came the demand for fuel, and someone had to take note of the demand. Lured by more money than he had ever seen, Joe Welling forsakes his true vocational passion to become an agent of industrialism. Certainly, such a choice is his to make, yet implicit in Welling’s message is the idea that he cannot go back. He allows himself to be trapped within the “most materialistic age in the history of the world,” unable and unwilling to explore a career in journalism (p. 81).

It is through Joe Welling that Anderson once again critiques the American machine age. Welling tells George Willard, “the world is on fire,” and that “decay is always going on” (p. 106). Continuing the theme of Armageddon, Welling asks Tom and Edward King to consider a world in which,

all of the wheat, the corn, the oats, the peas, the potatoes, were

all by some miracle swept away. Now here we are, you see, in this country. There is a high fence built around us. We’ll suppose that. No one can get over the fence and all the fruits of the earth are destroyed, nothing left but these things, these grasses.

Would we be done for? (p. 111)
On one hand, one can interpret Welling’s vision as yet another of his patented rants. On the other, his vision is not so far-fetched. After all, according to Anderson, a “revolution [had] in fact taken place. The coming of industrialism, attended by the roar and rattle of affairs” turned upside down the old order of agrarianism (p. 70). With “the going and coming of trains, the growth of cities, the building of the interurban car lines that weave in and out of towns and past farm houses . . . [came] tremendous changes in . . . Mid-America” (p. 71). Surely, Welling’s list—the wheat, the oats, the corn, etc.—never does vanish. But in the wake of industrialism, farming in America would change forever. Welling’s observation that “decay is always going on” certainly applied to the thousands of family farms whose holdings vanished as the twentieth century advanced. With agricultural machinery came unprecedented productivity, yet the cost was an entire way of life for countless Americans, a phenomena John Steinbeck captures in *Grapes of Wrath*. Joe Welling asks, “Would we be done for?” Anderson uses the oil salesman to project a foreboding the specifics of which Anderson could not fully comprehend, but one that future events would vindicate.

Several of *Winesburg*’s characters believe that moving to modern industrial cities will solve the various problems they experience. Some act on this belief while others merely entertain the prospect. Among the latter group is the Presbyterian Reverend Curtis Hartman, one of Winesburg’s most estimable citizens: “The minister himself was rather a favorite of the town. The elders of the church liked him because he was quiet and unpretentious and Mrs. White, the banker’s wife, thought him scholarly and refined” (p. 147). Beneath this polished exterior, there is a troubled man. Hartman has deep sexual longing, and his wife “has always been ashamed of passion” (p. 154). A
Winesburg schoolteacher, Kate Swift, brings matters to a head. Studying late into the evening, the reverend happens to see, from his office window, Kate Swift in the house next-door, reading and smoking in bed, a quilt pulled just past her chest, revealing her “bare shoulders and white throat” (p. 149). Simultaneously shocked and compelled to stare, Hartman “remembered that she . . . had lived for two years in New York City (p. 149). In the minister’s mind, her exposure to America’s industrial epicenter gives her an edginess that deeply affects him. Anderson makes a point of tempting the minister with an urban woman. Thereafter, Hartman alternates between lust for Kate Swift and his dedication to God, until finally he “began to think that he would get out of the ministry and try some other way of life. “‘I shall go to some city and get into business,’” he declares (p. 153). The city is one solution to his dilemma, and he acknowledges that going there would mean a total rejection of faith: “‘If my nature is such that I cannot resist sin, I shall give myself over to sin’” (p. 153). Therefore, the city is once again synonymous with the deteriorating values Anderson highlights most specifically in “Godliness.”

Like Curtis Hartman, Seth Richmond considers leaving Winesburg for the city, not to blend in among the Sodomites, but to find a definitive life purpose. Several Winesburg citizens feel that he has an uncommon mind. The narrator, however, more accurately judges him as one with “no great underlying purpose,” one with “no definite plan for his life” (p. 133). Moreover, he has few interests, and “he wished that he himself might become thoroughly stirred by something” (p. 133). This condition is of course one shared by many young people. For lack of a better plan, Seth Richmond determines to go to a city where he “may be able to make a place for [himself] by steady working” (p.
Too many of Winesburg’s citizens, he believes, merely gather around to talk, never accomplishing anything. Idle chit-chat is unproductive. Practicality and efficiency are tangible, he concludes; industry is the solution to his lack of direction.

Helen White’s beauty is tangible too, and she makes it difficult for him to leave Winesburg as planned. Walking with her one afternoon, he considers how “it would be something new and altogether delightful to remain and walk often through the streets with Helen White” (p. 140). Instead of expressing this fond feeling, he talks of his future, his intention to “strike out,” “to work and keep quiet” (p. 141). Announcing that this meeting will be their last, he never learns to what extent she admires him. When, in a final gesture, she “[put] her hand upon Seth’s shoulder,” “[drawing] his face down toward her own upturned face,” they both felt a “cutting regret that some vague adventure that had been present in the spirit of the night would now never be realized” (p. 142). And it never is. A definitive focus on work—industrialism’s modus operandi—ultimately cancels all sentiment and humanity.

Whatever becomes of Seth Richmond remains untold; what seems sure is that the roar and clatter of urban industry will not drown out his memories of Helen White. That is, the city is almost certainly not the solution he seeks. The same holds true for Elmer Cowley, the subject of “Queer.” No other Winesburg tale more clearly illustrates the transition from agrarianism to industrialism and its awkward effects upon humanity. Before opening a general store, the Cowleys had long been farmers. Ebenezer Cowley, Elmer’s father, started the store because “he had not been happily placed as a farmer” (p. 191). But he finds little joy in being a merchant, and he lacks the commercial acumen to turn a profit. The store’s wares do not match the town’s demands. Cowley and Son’s
store sells nothing practical. Rather, the shelves are stocked with such goods as “patent suspender buttons, cans of roof paint, bottles of rheumatism cure, and a substitute for coffee” (p. 191). When salesmen visit the store, peddling similarly useless items like a substitute for collar buttons, Ebenezer Cowley becomes perfectly confused. Uncertain whether to buy, “he was afraid, first that he would stubbornly refuse to buy and thus lose the opportunity to sell again; second that he would not be stubborn enough and would in a moment of weakness buy what could not be sold” (p. 192). The explanation for such chaos is obvious: Elmer Cowley knows everything of farming and nothing of running a business. A smooth transition from agriculture to commerce is impossible for him.

Well aware of the “queerness” of Cowley and Son’s store, Elmer Cowley seeks to alter Winesburg’s perception of his family. If he could only speak with George Willard on the issue, all wrongs would be righted, Elmer decides, for he feels the news reporter “typified the town, represented in his person the spirit of the town” (p. 194). All attempts to speak with the reporter fail, however, as Elmer struggles mightily during social interactions. The extraordinary embarrassment he feels as a member of the Cowley family, compounded with the anger he harbors toward the town, overwhelm him. He often flails his arms violently as words fail to come forth, leaving his listener utterly confused, even terrified, by such awkwardness.

An alternate plan is to flee and make a new start where people know nothing of Elmer Cowley’s past. He decides upon Cleveland, where he “would get work … and become friends with other workmen. He would no longer be queer and would make friends. Life would begin to have warmth and meaning for him as it had for others” (p. 199). Would it, though? Would he be able to communicate more fluidly with other men
who perform mundane tasks on an assembly line for twelve hours a day? In “Queer,” Elmer Cowley never has a warm, friendly interaction with anyone, even people he seems to like. Suffocated by an inability to express basic emotions, communication is impossible for him. Would his neurosis simply disappear in Cleveland? Or is it already deeply entrenched, brought on by an inability to adapt to the new economy? “Queer’s” final scene provides evidence.

Despite previous failure, Elmer Cowley calls upon George Willard again, hoping once and for all to defend his name before boarding a train to Cleveland. Their exchange provides a vivid portrait of Cowley’s communication problems. An attempt at clarity evolves into “half coherent” gibberish before, lost in his own confusion and anger, he begins to pummel George Willard with a terrific force of blows” (pp. 200-201). Hopping aboard the train, Cowley concludes, “I guess I showed him I ain’t so queer” (p. 201). Of course, his actions convey the opposite message. Like a substitute for collar buttons, Elmer Cowley is an odd product of the bourgeoning machine age, which, based on passages from his notebook and his dialogue with Toomer, Anderson began to loathe.
3. EARLY ENCOURAGEMENT

For Anderson, modern America presented a paradox. On one hand, the transition from the agrarian to the industrial produced a new American, a new psyche, for the literary artist to analyze. Apart from the machine age, Elmer Cowley would not exist. But this shift highly disturbed Anderson. In a letter to Jean Toomer, dated January 3, 1924, in which *Winesburg*’s author discusses his reactions to *Cane*, Anderson becomes nostalgic for a simpler, pre-industrial era. He begins by reminiscing about time spent in New Orleans, where he often took to observing black shipyard laborers, men who, he fancied, were free from machine-age neuroses. Anderson then draws connections between them and *Cane*’s tenant farmers. He notes, “you [Toomer] I am sure belong to . . . us moderns, and it is quite wonderful to think you belong also to the men I saw working on the docks, the black men.” Toomer’s black reapers and planters, glistening under the Georgia sun, engaged in “honest,” organic work, thrill Anderson to the toes. Grouping Toomer with the modernists, Anderson must have recognized *Cane*’s troubled characters; indeed, they are impossible to ignore. He refers to Toomer as “nervous distraught one.” Yet in his letters to Toomer, Anderson devotes little attention to the abundance of evidence Toomer works into *Cane* suggesting that southern and northern blacks were significantly affected by industrialization and materialism. This is peculiar if for no other reason than Anderson himself devoted so much attention to these concerns in *Winesburg, Ohio*. An explanation, however, exists.
Instead of paying much attention to modern neuroses in *Cane*, Anderson was more interested in Toomer’s portrayal of blacks and the southern landscape, which Anderson viewed as rich with vitality and therapeutic. Anderson, after his dialogue with Toomer had ceased, moved south, due mostly to the fact that he found the mechanistic north an infertile environment for writing. Mark Helbling, in his essay “Sherwood Anderson and Jean Toomer,” cites a telling passage from Anderson’s notebook:

> Can you imagine sweet words in a factory, sing them, dance them?
> In the end they will make factory hands of us writers too.
> The whites will get us. They win

Biographer William A. Sutton adds that Anderson, having worked in a paint factory as well as a bicycle manufacturing facility, “… had seen the factories entering such villages as Clyde [Anderson’s home town], [and] found himself hating the factory work, saw in it the foe of creativity in man.” It comes as hardly surprising, then, that Anderson was captivated by Toomer’s lyrical portrayal of the southern soil. Weary of industrial life and too fond of Toomer’s rich portrait of sugar cane, pines and folk songs, Anderson appears not to have wanted his impression of the south as a place of healing tainted by Winesburg-like crises. He romanticized the south, confessing to Toomer, “I have myself—having Italian blood in me, have a constant call southward. Something pagan and warm comes to me on a train southward.” Here, the mild climate and robust dockworkers contrasted sharply, in Anderson’s mind, with the cold edginess of the industrial north. So excited by what he found in places like Mobile and New Orleans, Anderson wanted to paint watercolors of black laborers. Again, he tells Toomer,
I could approach the brown men and women through a quite impersonal love of color of skins … I had, I thought, an advantage as I could not draw. I went for lines and spaces only and the color I could lay into them.\textsuperscript{22}

Anderson’s undeveloped painting skills reflect his undeveloped understanding of black consciousness. Working only with surfaces, Anderson could probe no deeper than a “love of color of skins.” He managed only rough outlines filled with colors he thought captured his subjects’ integrity. Not surprisingly, when Anderson read Toomer’s much more complex portrait, his appreciation of it was incomplete. Focusing almost exclusively upon \textit{Cane}’s lyricism and what he perceived to be its racial authenticity—something Anderson himself sought to express in his watercolors—Anderson encouraged Toomer not to let the white, Modern man “get him”—to spoil his style or influence his artistic focus. He would lament seeing Toomer’s powers wasted on machine-age neuroses. Anderson found refuge in \textit{Cane}. Many of Toomer’s sketches do have, on the surface, a distinct and powerful agrarian charm. Delving further, however, Toomer’s characters are hardly the neuroses-free dockworkers who intrigued Anderson. It is important to examine their struggle for identity and unity as a race, as well as the degree to which industrialism touches even the Georgia cane fields. But first, it is essential to note that Anderson’s misunderstanding of black consciousness was, not surprisingly, common, even among sensitive white artists. Mark Helbling corroborates Thomas Yingling’s argument that Anderson and other whites viewed blacks as a “primitive” race that had not been caught up in industrialism’s great surge forward. Helbling argues that Anderson admired Toomer for capturing the “spiritual and aesthetic qualities which
Anderson saw most threatened by the emergent industrial order of the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{23} Moreover, Anderson, like many of his contemporaries, viewed machines as emasculating devices. They replaced male vigor. By contrast, when Anderson observed black shipyard workers, bare-backed and bustling along the New Orleans docks, he scrawled a revealing message in his notebook: “What I would not give to be a man, not the shadow of a man.”\textsuperscript{24} Here were men, not mere shells of men emasculated by the roar and clatter of industry, he concluded.

What Anderson fails to focus upon is that \textit{Cane}’s men are not particularly unlike \textit{Winesburg}’s. The effects of materialism extend into Toomer’s Georgia and urban settings. As Darwin Turner notes, Toomer was not so much concerned with “sweat glistening on muscles of black bodies” as he was with the “frustration that trouble[s] Blacks.”\textsuperscript{25} It is true, as Darrell McNeely argues, that “away from the sterility of the Northern cities [Toomer] knew best—Washington, Chicago, New York—[he] encountered a new spiritual force.”\textsuperscript{26} But this rural stimulation did not blind Toomer from the difficulties that plagued his race; he first explores, in section one, how the materialism of the machine age destroyed bonds between southern blacks.

In spite of its remarkably satisfying expression, “Karintha” highlights broken relationships within a rural Georgia community. As Karintha hears her parents’ lovemaking through the thin walls of the family’s two-room house, the narrator concludes, “One could but imitate one’s parents, for to follow them was the way of God.”\textsuperscript{27} Following this familial or cultural determinism, Karnitha’s sexual activity starts at an early age. No longer the child whose “sudden darting past you was a bit of vivid color,” she quickly develops “contempt” for those whose advances caused her to “ripen too
soon” (p. 2). At twenty, her spirit is already waning; the narrator offers no hope that she will mend ties with any of her lovers; “they will die not having found … out” her true character (p. 2).

Rafael A. Cancel argues that Karintha is one of several women in Cane who possess “all the primitive instincts and the lust for life” he associates with the “soil and the South.” 28 The problem is not Karintha’s libido; it is the men. None of them desire anything more than a carnal relationship. To be sure, they run stills, take city jobs and go to college, all in an effort to bring her money. Yet they miss her soul. Cancel suggests that a focus on the material, mechanistic world prevents Karintha’s lovers from seeing her true needs: love, nurturing and unity. Their industrial mindset severs bonds. Could Cane’s men and women be reconciled, as Cancel contends, “through an acceptance of the past and the healing contact of the soil[?]” 29 Or have they largely forgotten what “the past” looks like? Has modern materialism already spoiled Toomer’s rural landscape, and its inhabitants, as it has Winesburg, Ohio, and Anderson’s grotesques? As Karintha fades, having aborted a child and lost all connection with the child’s father, it appears that the effects of industrialism have ravaged even a small Georgia farm village. Other pieces within Cane’s first section support this assessment.

“Fern,” a tale in which the protagonist embodies the rural south, demonstrates two important ideas. First, the woman—and therefore the landscape—is ineffably beautiful. The “curves of her profile, like mobile rivers, [flow] to a common delta” (p. 14). Second, she is inscrutable; the narrator, like all men, is deeply attracted to her, but he cannot establish a connection. By extension, he cannot establish a connection with the rural countryside that, as Cancel claims, heals the alienated urban spirit.
Patricia Chase points out that “no one really touches Fern” because she “belongs to the soil of Georgia and the scent of the cane.” She possesses all the sensory charms of Toomer’s setting, and nothing more. She has no identity or vitality. Consequently, when men mate with her, they derive little or no pleasure from it. Once this awkward experience passes, “they [become] attached to her, and [hunger] after finding the barest trace of what she might desire” (p. 14). Like Karintha’s lovers, and indeed like all men in Cane, they assume she desires material favors: candy, a house, or some “magnificent something.” Yet these things will not satisfy her.

The narrator, however, wonders if he can give her something other than sex, followed by the material “something” to compensate for the vacancy brought on by the “bestowal of … bodies” (p. 16). This northerner does not want to make a concubine of her. He seeks a meaningful relationship; he seeks the sort of healing that Cancel discusses, a rich understanding of Fern’s beauty, the soil’s beauty. They walk at dusk, and he would like to hold her. He does so, briefly, before she breaks free and faints. No bond is made. No lasting healing comes, and, as the narrator heads back north, a sad longing for Fern—and the rural south—remains, despite the fact that he only faintly understands what he perceives to be her redemptive quality. Toomer seems to question whether this quality is more myth than reality. Like Karintha, Fern’s beauty is tainted by materialistic men, and, by extension, the beautiful landscape is not as therapeutic as Anderson would like to believe.

Unlike Karintha and Fern, who are enigmas men find irresistible, Esther is not exceptionally erotic, or even pretty. No men seek work to bring her money; they do not spend time wondering what they can do for her. Rather, it is Esther who dreams of a
man, the preacher and cotton-trader King Barlo. Before he accumulates his riches, Barlo proclaimed the gospel with a thundering voice. Nine years old at the time, Esther sees him as a mythic figure, and to others, “he assumes the outlines of [a] visioned African” (p. 21). His aura seems sufficient to reconcile his race to God and to redeem its native strength and pride as well. The young girl is deeply impressed.

Evident in a majority of *Cane*, however, materialism infects Barlo and taints Esther’s recollection of him. Sixteen years later, he returns to her town, “driving a large new car” (p. 23). Once again, his presence is commanding. Several in the town cease their chores to witness the one-man parade. Suddenly animate, in stark contrast to the usual humdrum manner in which she assists shoppers in her father’s grocery, she too rushes to see the King. Yet as a “sharply dressed white girl passes” Esther, she “wishes that she might be like her. Not white; she has no need for being that. But sharp, sporty, with get up about her. Barlo is connected with that wish” (p. 23). Surely, the way to attract this material man is to cover herself in luxury. Soon after, she dismisses this reasoning. She decides to win him over with her own values, lest purposeless men and loose women spoil him further. Materialism is not the answer; a true connection is. Barlo, though, is already lost. In his drunkenness, he cannot comprehend Esther’s attempt to reach him. In all his opulence, “Barlo seems hideous” to her (p. 25). And when she emerges from the dizzying tobacco and liquor fumes of Nat Bowle’s place, she cannot recognize the town. The air, the streets, and the locale itself, take on Barlo’s ugliness. Once again, a focus on wealth radically alters Toomer’s rural setting.

In spite of broken gender relationships and the corrupting influence of materialism, *Cane*’s first section certainly captures the bucolic headiness that so
intoxicated Anderson, as well as Toomer. Karintha’s skin is like dusk on the eastern horizon. The whole countryside seemed to flow into Fern’s eyes; “Flowed into them with the soft listless cadence of Georgia’s South” (p. 15). Everywhere there is “A spray of pine needles / Dipped in western horizon gold” (p. 18). With the twilight comes the “Full moon rising on the waters of [one’s] heart” (p. 19). Even the November cotton flower emerges from the spent, late-year earth, producing “Beauty so sudden for that time of year” (p. 4). The sweet rhythm of spirituals and folk songs travels slowly through air and mind. Undoubtedly, one can easily dwell on these sensual textures and ignore or forget that here too devastating problems exist. The land from which the November cotton flower emerges is seldom the locus of healing that Cancel suggests that it is. Dan Moore imagines that Washington’s roots travel south, and indeed northern industry and a materialist mindset even reach and affect Toomer’s Georgia. As the book’s second section begins, what becomes even clearer is that, much to Anderson’s disappointment, the white man had already “gotten” Toomer; his black characters experience many of the same modern neuroses manifested in Winesburg’s grotesques.
4. INDUSTRIALISM AND BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS

Nine hundred miles north of the cotton flowers and mild Georgia air, the cramped tenements and mad streets of Washington and Chicago fill Cane’s second section. Along Seventh Street,

Money burns the pocket, pocket hurts,

Bootleggers in silken shirts,

Balooned, zooming Cadillacs,

Whizzing, whizzing down the street-car tracks. (p. 39)

This first passage of the book’s urban chapters sets the tone for the entire section. Materialism—money, silken shirts, Cadillacs—permeates all life and thought. Its color is seen in the “shanties, brick office buildings, theatres, drug stores, restaurants, and cabarets” (p. 39). The narrator wonders how this focus on wealth and speed started; what set its blood flowing? Who set its blood flowing? It could not have been the Divine, for God would “duck his head in shame and call for the Judgment Day” at the sight of “zooming Cadillacs” and bootleggers peddling moonshine (p. 39). Ultimately, these questions go unanswered, but one thing is certain. Cane’s black migrants who live in northern industrial cities have great difficulty adjusting to their new lifestyle.

Like many of Karintha’s lovers, Rhobert has left the south to work in the north. Having left behind a wife and children, he will unlikely return; material goods command his attention; he thinks of little else. Not only does he own a house; he wears it, “like a monstrous diver’s helmet” (p. 40). He cannot take it off, for “life” would crush him the
“minute he pulled his head out” (p. 40). Similar to Jesse Bentley’s workers, Rhobert is the material world’s slave, and therefore the story contrasts with “Cotton Song,” a poem in which a collective voice calls for freedom. The group’s chains will fall upon Judgment Day. But the speakers “ain’t agwine t wait until th Judgment Day” (p. 9). One need not accept an oppressive status quo. Their progressive anthem is an active call for racial equality; if their situation is to change, they must “roll.” Rhobert, on the other hand, will indeed wait for the shackles to fall. He will not roll toward an unfettered existence. True, he faces a different enemy, one that affects all races. But it is all the more dangerous because of its greater subtlety. Materialism is a less apparent and stigmatized threat than racism. Practically speaking, Rhobert can escape the industrial north more readily than he can racial oppression, but his house and other material goods own his spirit. His family, who “he cares not two straws” to see again “drown[s] in his dreams” (p. 40). Relationships suffer; he simultaneously alienates and becomes alienated. The cycle of earn and consume is perpetual. Ultimately, the tale’s narrator shows Rhobert sinking, and he acknowledges how sad it is to see a man “straining the raw insides of his throat” as he chokes down more possessions (p. 40).

“Seventh Street” and “Rhobert” establish the fact that blacks experienced new challenges in the mechanized north. “Avey’s” narrator responds to these difficulties. Several critics, most notably Burney Hollis, argue that Avey is a displaced southerner who has grown indifferent to the “whir” of Washington. Furthermore, the narrator, raised and educated in the north, fails to understand her rural sensibility. As a result, he mistakes her indifference for laziness, and while attempting to “northernize” her, he
“does not realize … that Avey is already free and that his efforts are really aimed at freeing himself from the cold stones and asphalt of the urban” world.\textsuperscript{31}

To be sure, Hollis’s reading is plausible; the rural/urban tension in “Avey” is central to nearly every piece in Toomer’s book. Is the narrator really an object of satire, though, as Hollis contends? Or does he echo concerns Toomer himself voiced? The narrator tells Avey that “her own nature and temperament … needed a larger life for their expression. How incapable Washington was of understanding that need … [He] pointed out that in lieu of proper channels, her emotions had overflowed into paths that dissipated them” (p. 46). An impersonal city environment drains Avey’s spirit; Hollis and others concur. Interestingly, Toomer wrote Anderson, voicing the same concerns that “Avey’s” narrator addresses:

\begin{quote}
The need [for black artistic voices in the early twenties] is great. People within the race cannot see it. In fact, they are likely to prove to be directly hostile. But with the youth of the race, unguided or misguided as they now are, there is a tragic need. \textit{Talent dissipates itself for want of creative channels of expression, and encouragement}.\textsuperscript{32}
\end{quote}

This last (emphasized) sentence is nearly a mirror image of the narrator’s observation: “[He] pointed out that in lieu of proper channels, her emotions had overflowed into paths that dissipated them.” For a brief time, Toomer became interested in encouraging black artists, and he thought of a black literary magazine to achieve that end. The youth of Toomer’s race, people like Avey, merely needed encouragement to transcend the city’s drone and express themselves. Otherwise their emotions would overflow into paths that dissipated them, paths like the materialism upon which Rhobert focuses. Toomer calls
such dissipation tragic, and “Avey’s” narrator thinks of her as a tragic figure. Unlike Fern, “Avey’s face was pale, and her eyes were heavy. She does not have the gray crimson-splashed beauty of the dawn” (p. 47). Perhaps Hollis is right in saying that in spite of the narrator’s view, Avey is already free, that she survives through an acceptance of and indifference to her sterile industrial surroundings. Perhaps the narrator errs trying to impose his artistic impulse upon a woman who feels no need for transcendence.

Judging by his letter to Anderson and pieces like “Rhobert,” though, Toomer seems to have resisted a compromised sensibility; if blacks, particularly those in the north, were indifferent to industrialism’s effects, they were “unguided or misguided.” “Avey’s” narrator does not merely promote art for art’s sake. Inherent in his message to Avey is a call to thrive rather than merely survive.

Dan Moore, the protagonist of “Box Seat,” has little in common with Avey’s narrator. Both, however, take issue with women who attract them but are under the stifling influence of materialism. Unlike Rhobert, Dan does not give himself over to modern slavery. He is a southerner who sees the industrial north as a place where the economic and social freedoms of blacks in particular are limited. Dan has no job, and the ever-present threat of poverty only exacerbates his dismal outlook. It is unclear whether he is unemployed by choice—unwilling to submit to the capitalist machine—or because of limited opportunities. But his love interest, Muriel, tells him that he would be much better off should he simply embrace materialism and become a “normal” participant within the Washington economy. “Why don’t you get a job and settle down?” she asks him, adding, “you can’t live without money” (p. 59). Dan, however, finds no answer in this pragmatic approach. Employment and money are not solutions to the urban
problems he experiences. For Dan, the north is restrictive, even suffocating. Unlike the south’s endless horizon, the houses along Thirteenth Street are built one atop the next. When inside of Muriel’s boarding house, he feels the structure contract around him. Moreover, he senses great racial oppression. Walking down Thirteenth Street towards Muriel’s boarding house, he senses that [white] neighbors watch him as he climbs the front step and rings the bell. Perhaps too poor to show himself in this part of town, Dan imagines their alarm; they might “think that he is trying to sneak, to break in” (p. 56). Having come from an area in which he rubs shoulders with dope-fiends, he becomes enraged as he thinks about the city’s economic gap and the associated prejudices. In the north, not a soul knows how the hands of Jesus touched him among the southern sugarcane. He is displaced, other, and he attempts to explain to Muriel that,

Life bends joy and pain, beauty and ugliness, in such a way that no one may isolate them. No one should want to. Perfect joy, or perfect pain, with no contrasting element to define them, would mean a monotony of consciousness, would mean death. (p. 59)

This binary is a worldview through which Dan explains the contrast between his experiences in the north and the south. In the south, people would look into his eyes and think, that is Dan Moore. In the north, he is a poor man in a materialist culture, a zero in the system. He left the south to “come to a sick world to heal it” (p. 56). Muriel, however, resists his gospel; his juxtaposition of extremes unsettles her. She confesses to Berny, a friend, that he makes her feel queer. Muriel never wants to think about pain. When Dan broaches past difficulties Muriel has had and acknowledges “what pain the last few months must have been” for her, she pleads with him to let the matter fall; “Let's
dont mention that,” she urges (p. 58). Like Avey, she attempts to remain indifferent to the perennial troubles she faces in Washington. Rather than dwell on her cramped existence, she would rather go to the theatre and enjoy herself.

Dan’s inability to get through to Muriel is indicative of his inability to get through to all African Americans. He can hardly tolerate a reality in which people of his race ignore the industrial life, which he views as a more muted form of slavery. Whether in their houses or the Lincoln Theatre, they are always bolted into place, as if slavery’s fetters never came undone. At the theatre, as the jazz overture ends, Dan looks toward Muriel who is applauding and says to himself, “… smile and she’ll clap. Do what youre bid, you she slave” (p. 63). She does wear her hat in the theatre, for social code forbids her bobbed haircut.

Worthless to a capitalist structure, and unable to make a connection with his race, Dan resorts to violence. En route to Muriel’s house, sensing the neighbors watching him with suspicion, his anger feeds a violent reverie:

Break in. Get an ax and smash in. Smash in their faces…


Baboon from the zoo. And then the cops come. ‘No I aint no baboon. I aint Jack the Ripper. I’m a poor man without work … (p. 56)

Perhaps the first literary connection one makes with this scene is not *Winesburg, Ohio*, but several of Anderson’s grotesques not only harbor violent thoughts, but some, most notably Elmer Cowley, pummel others with great blows. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that “Box Seat and Anderson’s “Queer” conclude in similar ways. The
protagonists of both stories fail to adapt to a new economy and feel duly trapped within themselves. Both entertain fits of rage. Both reach a breaking point. Elmer Cowley, no longer able to tolerate what he interprets to be condescending looks from his Winesburg neighbors, levels the town’s newsboy before declaring “I ain’t so queer.” On he moves to an undisclosed destination. Dan Moore, throughout the theatre scene, cannot endure what he perceives to be Muriel’s slavery, and he steps over fellow theatre-goers en route to the exit. Treading upon a “corn-foot man” whose cry irritates him, Dan “tweaks the fellow’s nose” and “his fist hooks [his] jaw” (p. 67). His aggression seemingly spent, Dan refuses to acknowledge the man’s request for a back alley brawl. Instead, he “keeps going on” (p. 67). Feeling alienated by those around them, Dan Moore and Elmer Cowley proceed, alone, in the Modern world. Dan is hardly a primitive innocent. He is related to the New Orleans dockworker Anderson so admires in skin tone only.

Paul Johnson, another Georgia émigré, who lives in Chicago, shares many of Dan Moore’s struggles, but he responds to them not with violence but with sex; like Dan’s, however, Paul’s response is not successful—it does not alleviate his troubles. Paul, a man of mixed race surrounded by predominately white acquaintances, struggles to find a place within the generally affluent urban community in which he lives. Those who know him and those whom he fascinates struggle to understand or identify Paul. Bona Hale, unable to ignore his beautiful creamed skin tone, thinks of him as a harvest moon, an autumn leaf, and finally—less poetically—as a nigger. “Don’t all the dorm girls say so?” she reflects, and “don’t you, when you are sane, say so?” (p. 70). Art Carlstrom, Paul’s roommate, thinks of him as “moony” and “dark blood” each time they fail to sustain a connection.
Rather alienated because of the racial divide, Paul often thinks fondly of home. The view from his room looks over the “Hurtling Loop-jammed L,” and to retreat from this industrial madness, Paul follows the setting sun,

Over the stock-yards where a fresh stench is just rising, across wheat lands that are still waving their stubble, into the sun. Paul follows the sun to a pine-matted hillock in Georgia. He sees the slanting roofs of gray unpainted cabins tinted lavender. A Negress chants a lullaby beneath the mate-eyes of a southern planter. Her breasts are ample for the suckling of a song. She weans it, and sends it, curiously weaving, among the lush melodies of cane and corn. Paul follows the sun into himself in Chicago. (p. 71)

The erotic song, which contrasts sharply with the discordant, hurtling L-Train, captivates Paul, much like Karintha is captivated by the sound of her parents’ love-making. During this reverie, Art interrupts; he has fixed a date for him with Bona; “And say, she’s on fire,” Art adds (72).

For this man who dreams of the erotic South, Paul shows little interest in Bona—indeed in any white women—beyond a physical one. Certainly, Paul is capable of fraternal intimacy, but he has his doubts about Art, Bona and Helen. He feels that the racial and economic discrepancy between them is too evident. As Bona and Paul walk toward Crimson Gardens, Paul notices that, “Mellow stone mansions overshadow clapboard homes which now resemble Negro shanties in some southern alley” (p. 74). Bona attempts to speak to him, but “Her words have no feel to them” (p. 74). Distracted by the image, Paul cannot fathom Bona’s confession, “I want to be near you … Paul I
love you” (p. 74). Skeptical that a white woman would dare to make her home among a Negro shanty, he offers her physical affection only: “What can I say to you, brave dear woman—I cant talk of love. Love is like a dry grain in my mouth unless it is wet with kisses” (p. 74). At Crimson Gardens, Paul senses that others see “not attractiveness in his dark skin, but difference” (p. 75). Looking at Art and Bona and Helen, he wonders, “Who were they anyway? God, if he knew them” (p. 75). When they sit to drinks and cigarettes, Paul feels isolated until the jazz singer begins her song. Her rhythm reminds him of the full-figured Negress about whom he dreams. Looking at the sparkle of the jazz singer’s rabbit eyes, Paul erotically sighs, “O Eliza” (p. 76). Although he feels an emotional connection is impossible with Bona, he can “know” her in a sexual way; he can have intimacy with her like Karintha has with her suitors. In fact, he thinks the same about Helen, for when the two couples begin to dance, Paul looks toward Helen, who he finds a “supple, perfect little dancer,” and he “wishes for the next dance when he and Art will exchange” partners (p. 77). Bona senses Paul’s wandering eyes and decides she must win him to herself. Throughout the ensuing dance, passionate blood surges not through their minds but their bodies until they lead one another to the coatroom. Sex equals potential redemption.

The doorman, the other black character in Toomer’s tale, helps them exit the club. Paul, somewhat sobered by the sight of him and the evening chill, leaves Bona in the street. He must tell the doorman that these wealthy northerners, who once saw not attractiveness but difference and otherness in black skin, are not such bigots after all. He will [sexually] know a white woman whose face is like rose petals. Times are changing, he trusts—“something beautiful is going to happen” (p. 78). But when he returns to the
street he discovers Bona had vanished. Momentarily intoxicated by the dance and Paul’s 
aggressive instincts, she most likely recalls her earlier declaration, “you will never love 
me.” Unlike Karintha or Fern, this northern woman will not allow herself to be yet 
another of a man’s sexual conquests. Once again, one of Toomer’s urban protagonists, 
transplanted from the sensual south, is alienated in the cold, industrial north. Paul’s 
sexual assertiveness brings him no closer to his white peers. Like several Winesburg 
tales, most notably “The Teacher” and “Strength of God,” “Bona and Paul” features 
characters suffering from communication problems and, ultimately, unfulfilled sexual 
desire. Simply because he is black and from the “primitive” south does not mean Paul 
lacks the psychology to experience the same problems that Kate Swift, Curtis Hartman 
and George Willard encounter.

Clearly, Paul Johnson, Rhobert, Avey, Dan Moore and others in Cane’s second 
section find little success among mechanistic urban locales whose character Toomer 
captures in “Seventh Street.” Some, like Rhobert and Avey, remain indifferent to the 
manner in which the city drains their vitality. Others—Dane Moore and Paul Johnson— 
find the contrast between their homeland and the city nearly intolerable, and they refuse 
to follow the status quo; Dan Moore’s frustration manifests itself in violence. Paul 
Johnson relates to northern women in a manner similar to the way in which men in the 
first section relate to Esther, Carma and others. When Paul nostalgically follows the 
setting sun to Georgia, Cancel’s argument—that the southern soil has a healing quality— 
comes to bear. It is an argument that Anderson made, as well, and “Kabins,” Cane’s final 
installment, puts it to the test one last time. Is this region, and its people, more
“primitive,” uninfluenced by the northern economy and worldview? Or is belief in such a place wishful thinking?
5. KABNIS’S SOUTH: PLACE OF HEALING?

Ralph Kabnis, a black northern émigré, has come to rural Georgia to teach school. Essentially, Kabnis is a case study in Anderson’s theory of primitivism. Will he find his stay among people who, as Anderson puts it, exhibit less head and more feeling a therapeutic change from the industrial north and its grotesques? Kabnis is a valid study because he undergoes full immersion. He loses his educated northern accent in lieu of a black southern phonology, and, after a brief teaching stint, apprentices in Halsey’s wagon-wheel repair shop—a distinctly pre-industrial occupation. Yet there are elements of southern life that highly disturb him. From his cramped living quarters, he cannot ignore the “Night winds … [which] are vagrant poets, whispering,

White Man’s land

Niggers, sing.

Burn, bear black children

Till poor rivers bring

Rest, and sweet glory

In Camp Ground. (p. 81)

Kabnis finds the countryside ineffably beautiful, but it is a place where his race has bled. Unlike Tom Burwell, Kabnis has given whites no reason to hunt him. Yet he lives in constant fear; he hears of lynchings. Layman, a friend, tells him, “Nigger’s a nigger down this way, Professor. An only two dividins: good an bad” (p. 87). A “bad” one hides a loved one from those who pursue him; Kabnis learns about Mame Lamkins, who
was beaten beyond recognition for doing so. Because “a nigger baby aint supposed t
live,” her murderers also ripped the child from her womb and stuck it to a tree with a
knife (p. 90). Not surprisingly, Kabnis remains on edge, constantly. When a brick flies
through his window, carrying the message, “‘You northern nigger, its time fer y t leave,’”
he is convinced that whites want him dead; in the end he finds that a group of blacks was
responsible and that he was not even the intended recipient (p. 90). “Kabnis” becomes a
story about the black race and their inability to sustain unity.

There are several categories of blacks in “Kabnis.” Hanby, the principal of the
school where Kabnis teaches, fashions himself according to the “best New England
tradition” (p. 93). His dress and speech mirror those of northern whites; his intention is
to separate himself from his race. In a letter to Sherwood Anderson, Toomer criticizes
the likes of Hanby:

The Negro’s curious position in this western civilization invariably
forces him into one or the other of two extremes: either he denies
Negro entirely (as much as he can) and seeks approximation to an
Anglo-Saxon (white) ideal, or … he over-emphasizes what is Negro.
Both of these attitudes have their source in a feeling of (a desire not to
feel) inferiority.  

Later in the letter, Toomer mentions a new category—black artists, who will “aid in
giving the Negro to himself.” Kabnis and Lewis, both with northern university
educations, fit this mold in dissimilar ways. Finally, Toomer mentions a fourth group,
blacks who are “too instinctive to be anything but themselves” already. Halsey, Carrie
K., and Layman occupy space in this camp. One question “Kabnis” forces is this— will
the black artist “aid in giving the Negro to himself” if the Negro is already too instinctive to be anything but himself? Another is, can the black artist enlighten those of his race who, like Hanby, have embraced the white ideal? These questions, central to [black] identity and the artist’s influence upon it, merit close examination.

As a preface to these inquires, however, it is important to acknowledge that Kabnis’s task—that of a black artist, educated in the north, working in the south—is neither clear nor easy. William J. Goede argues that through Ralph Kabnis, “Toomer has expressed the universal anxiety of modern man, and it precisely because [Kabnis] is black that his experiences formulate, rather than limit, distinctly and honestly the tragedy of all life.” As a northerner, Kabnis, like Paul Johnson, knows that most modern whites see “not attractiveness in his dark skin, but difference” (p. 75). Despite his education, his identity is forever “moony,” “dark,” “cold” and “other.” When he moves south, Kabnis discovers that the tragedy of black life is more transparent than it is in the north. From Halsey and Layman, he learns that, here, his race still experiences clear oppression at the hands of whites. But they are not blacks’ only enemy. Hanby’s condescending airs divide rather than unify, and faulty Christian theology—insisted upon by most of the tale’s “instinctive” blacks—does not precipitate, but hinders, racial equality.

Hanby appears twice in “Kabnis,” each time creating a wider intra-racial rift. The narrator is not coy in his characterization: Hanby is a “well-dressed, smooth, rich black-skinned Negro who thinks there is no one quite so suave and polished as himself” (p. 93). Like King Barlo’s sleek sedan and pressed suits, Hanby’s northern materialism casts a shadow upon Toomer’s Georgia town. He has come to Kabnis’s room and dismisses him for drinking on school property. Hanby informs 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” (p. 93). Halsey, also present, echoes Kabnis’s hostile response, crying, “Let me get you told right now, Mr. Samuel Hanby … You’ve bullied enough about this town” (p. 94). On the second occasion, Hanby bullies Kabnis, now working for Halsey, yet again. Wanting a wagon axle shaped into a crow bar, he orders Kabnis, “Have that ready for me by three o’clock young man. I shall call for it” (p. 101). Although he does not call him “boy,” he no longer uses Kabnis’s name. Kabnis, under his breath, replies, “Th hell you say, you old black swamp-gut” (p. 101). Both men, well-educated, have drastically different views on how to ensure progress for blacks. One insists upon rules, discipline, and reflecting Anglo characteristics; the other upon “giving blacks to themselves.” Kabnis, truth be told, is hardly eloquent in persuading Hanby that he ought to embrace and promote an authentic black self. Instead, he resorts to juvenile name-calling. Yet it is far from certain, should Kabnis be more persuasive, whether he would influence the principal. Toomer makes clear that part of the tragedy of [black] life is divisiveness within the black community.

Another divisive issue in “Kabnis” is the misapplication of Christian theology, which victimizes Kabnis’s race. Most of the southern, “instinctual” blacks attend church; faith is central to their lives. Kabnis, however, feels that the southern “gospel” is a white man’s gospel that keeps blacks locked in their place. He rejects the southern Christian God, and calls Him a “Profligate red-nosed man about the town” (pp. 82-83). When Halsey and Layman relate accounts of white violence against blacks, Kabnis protests, “Cant something be done?” (p. 88). After a brief pause, he answers his own
question: “But of course not. This preacher-ridden race. Pray and shout. Theyre in the preacher’s hands. Thats what it is. And the preachers hands are in the white man’s pockets” (p. 88). He is convinced that the church preaches acceptance of injustice, a message that God’s people are not of this world; they must endure the world’s hardships until the end when the true prize will come. Father John seconds Kabnis’s perception: “Th sin whats fixed … upon th white folks— … —f tellin Jesus—lies. O th sin th white folks ‘mitted when they made the Bible lie” (p. 115). Halsey and Layman’s tales of carnage coincide with shouts of joy coming from the nearby church. A “sister cries frantically, ‘Jesus, Jesus, I’ve found Jesus.’” (p. 90). Mame Lamkins and other victims of white brutality are not religious martyrs. Kabnis cannot accept his race’s passivity but has trouble himself acting upon these injustices.

Lewis is “what a stronger Kabnis might have been” (p. 95). Like Kabnis, he believes blacks ought not wait for God to redeem them. Relaying to Kabnis a conversation he had with a man who claims, “People are too weak to correct themselves: the Redeemer is coming back,” Lewis states, “Interesting, eh, Kabnis? but not exactly what we want” (p. 99). Like the “Cotton Song” chanters, Lewis rejects the notion that people, particularly blacks, are too weak to correct themselves. If they defer their true freedom to the Apocalypse, their Christian theology is off, and therefore “Cant blame God if [they] dont roll” (p. 9). Lewis speaks the message, “Shackles fall upon the Judgment Day / But lets not wait for it” (p. 9). Yet those of his race in Sempter, Georgia find his ideas queer. The message attached to the rock that sailed through Kabnis’s window was directed at Lewis. Even those sympathetic to his call, like Layman, will not “roll.” Lewis concedes that Layman’s “incentive to his keeping quiet is so much greater
than anything I could have offered him to open up” (p. 99). He also admits that Halsey “Fits here. Belongs here” (p. 99). Halsey confirms this statement, noting, “Went overseas an saw France; an I come back. Been up North; an I come back. Went t school; but there aint no books whats got th feel t them of them there tools” (p. 100). Layman and Halsey are precisely the kind of individuals that Anderson believes the New Orleans dockworkers to be. They are the group who, Toomer recognizes, cannot be anything but themselves; their identity is too firmly established to heed Lewis’s urging. Lewis’s passion for his race has been too powerfully thwarted, and he leaves Sempter. It is a passion Kabnis, the writer, feels, for he wants “t feed [his race’s] soul” with his words (p. 110). Whether Lewis and Kabnis ever succeed in “giving the Negro to himself” is not clear. What “Kabnis” does reveal with a great degree of certainty is that the south is not the pre-industrial utopia Anderson fancied it to be. It is a place of healing for some, like Halsey and Layman. Both admit that their race is somewhat oppressed in Georgia, but neither can imagine living anywhere else. To others, the south is a place of division and frustration. Lewis and Kabnis want to promote a sovereign black identity, but their call for change is largely unwelcome, not necessarily by whites, but by people of their own race. As a result, they are, as Nellie McKay suggests, the “returning black “son[s]” … “too white to be black and too black to be white.” 36 They stand “outside of both cultures and become the epitome of alienated” men. 37
6. CONCLUSION

Toomer’s own life mirrored Lewis’s and Kabnis’s is many ways. Like Kabnis, Toomer taught school in rural Georgia. Like Lewis, he made several attempts to give men, particularly the oppressed, to themselves. While living in Chicago, around 1917, he lectured widely on socialism, evolution and the origins of the universe. The lectures soon stopped, for as he also spoke on the intelligence of women, several attendees took issue with his messages. His plans to begin a black literary magazine never materialized. In fact, Toomer would eventually deny being black, claiming instead to be “American.”

Anderson encouraged Toomer not to let the white man get him, not to let modern notions of despair and alienation dominate his lyrical work. What is clear, however, is that Toomer, both in his fiction and his life, not only focused on these modern symptoms but sought to alleviate them through art, lecturing and giving the oppressed a voice. Most of these exercises, however, Cane excepted, failed. Wherever Toomer went—Wisconsin, New York, his native Washington, Sparta, Georgia—he found what he perceived to be suffering, yet resistance to change. His own identity was in constant flux, and the experiences that served as material for Cane were indeed trying. After Cane’s publication, Toomer said that he never again wanted to feel as he did when writing his most well-known work. The dream fluted cane, pine forests and the Negress’s mollifying and erotic voice all have a therapeutic quality, but they are ultimately ineffective against the materialism that ruins relationships in Cane’s first section, and the racial division found in “Kabnis.” Moreover, the South’s natural beauty cannot sustain
its sons and daughters who have gone north and struggle to claim an identity of their own. *Cane* certainly contains elements of a pre-industrial landscape, but few—if any—of its characters are exempt from the effects of the machine-age. Even Halsey’s shop is losing business. Toomer’s stories and poems depict not a primitive race in a healing land, but alienated, fractured and displaced human beings who struggle to make sense of the volatile world around them.

Seeking to anchor himself in a chaotic modern world, Toomer abandoned literature, his literary acquaintances, and practiced mysticism, most notably as a follower of George Gurdjieff. Even after a falling out with the influential yet infamous mystic, Toomer continued to practice communal living. He remained firm in refusing his African heritage. Instead, he wanted to promote a unified American identity, for he felt racial distinctions divided rather than united. Unity is something Toomer advocated his entire life. Whether lecturing on socialism, writing *Cane*, seeking to bring together black literary voices, or practicing communal living, Jean Toomer sought to unite others with himself around various worldviews. He also desired a true connection with Sherwood Anderson, who he admired as a fellow artist and critic. As Anderson insisted upon discussing race throughout their epistolary discussions, Toomer initially complied but eventually grew wary of the issue and confessed to Waldo Frank that Anderson, for all his fascination with African Americans and modern psychology, only faintly understood what it meant to be black in modern America. As in all things, Toomer wanted a true, unified connection with *Winesburg’s* author, not a commendation for being a fine black, and therefore “other,” artist. The moment he felt such a relationship was impossible,
Toomer parted ways, continuing his search for identity in the first half of America’s
dynamic twentieth century.
NOTES


2 Ibid.


4 Darwin Turner, “An Intersection of Paths: Correspondence Between Jean Toomer and Sherwood Anderson,” CLA Journal 17, (1974): 455. Turner’s essay was the first piece of scholarship to have examined Toomer and Anderson’s letters, and it led me to consider why they parted ways—a subject I explore in this essay.

5 See Chad Berry, Southern Migrants, Northern Exiles (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000). Berry’s socio-linguistic study explores reasons why southerners went north for work, most notably that crop failures, combined with stable factory work available in cities like Detroit, led to this migration.


10 Jean Toomer. Letter to Waldo Frank. (Citation to be completed).


11 See particularly Yingling


13 Ibid.


17 Ibid.

18 See particularly Love.


22 Ibid.


33 Ibid, p. 104
Ibid, p. 104


38 Ibid, 24.

39 See particularly McKay, who discusses, at length, Toomer’s position on race post-Cane.