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Shifting Borders and Shaded Boundaries: Liminality, Identity, Language, and Place in Jean Toomer's *Cane*

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SHIFTING BORDERS AND SHADED BOUNDARIES: LIMINALITY, IDENTITY, LANGUAGE, AND PLACE IN JEAN TOOMER'S CANE

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ABSTRACT:

This thesis locates Jean Toomer’s *Cane* as Modernist text operating within the context of the Great Migration, pointing out ways in which the text reflects the great sense of anxiety, upheaval, and transformation generated as many members of the African American community left the rural South and moved to urban centers in the North. I analyze various discourses and the shifting balance of power present in the text as the narrative voice awards the most value to the ideologies of the rural and spiritual through contrast with the ideologies of the urban and material. This relationship repeatedly problematizes the text’s ability to produce one clear, stable message. Instead, the text remains unsettled, and the reader finds himself questioning the conventional definitions and boundaries of various concepts, but most importantly those of identity and race.
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CHAPTER ONE – INTRODUCTION

_Cane_ by Jean Toomer is a unique text in its capacity to capture and crystallize the liminal state of the African American community during the first part of the twentieth century. Toomer lived from 1894 to 1967, and _Cane_ was published in 1923, when Toomer was 28 years old. At the time of _Cane_’s inception, slavery in the United States had been outlawed for decades, yet the social position of African Americans, especially in the South, was still glaringly unequal to that of their white counterparts. The years when Toomer was writing were situated in the middle of The Great Migration, a time of great movement and upheaval for the African American community. Toomer’s text describes and demonstrates the problems that arose out of the monumental social shift occurring as African Americans from all over the rural South left their homes either by choice, as greater economic opportunities lay in the Northern urban centers, or by force, as intense racism coupled with the enforcement of Jim Crow laws made life in the South intolerable.

Before the Great Migration, nearly ninety percent of African Americans in the United States lived in former slave-holding states where social conditions were far from ideal. The growing racial intolerance marked by widespread lynching and Jim Crow laws caused black families to seek other environs. The Jim Crow laws created de-facto racial segregation in all public facilities, schools, and transportation in the South under the auspices of “separate but equal” standards. These laws also reinforced the line between blacks and whites and inhibited the attainment of African American civil liberties and rights. On top of the Jim Crow laws, the Second Ku Klux Klan was founded in 1915 as a response to political paranoia after World War I and the first waves of African Americans
moving to fill job openings in Northern urban centers. Klan membership peaked in the 1920s, right at the center of the Great Migration era; violent episodes including night rides, cross-burning, and lynching committed by this group occurred largely in the South and were aimed at African Americans, though the group was also anti-Semitic, anti-Catholic, and anti-Communist. In addition to these atrocities, economic conditions in the South were deteriorating as a boll weevil infestation decimated the cotton-growing industry and left impoverished the many families that had depended on share-cropping for their livelihood.

In conjunction with these conditions making the South undesirable, World War I created a demand for labor in the cities and the flow of European immigrants into America was halted by the Immigration Act of 1924. Along with the violent, volatile atmosphere pushing them out of their former homeland, the North offered African Americans better schools, the right for men to vote (and women as well after 1920), and plentiful job opportunities. As a result of these contributing factors, between the years of 1910 and 1940, more than 1.75 million African Americans uprooted their lives in the American South and moved to the Midwest, Northeast, and West. These migrants sought employment opportunities and refuge from racism as they settled mainly in industrial, urban centers like Washington, D.C., Chicago, New York, and Detroit.

Unfortunately, this transition did not go entirely smoothly; tensions rose between incoming blacks and working-class whites who were competing for the same jobs and housing in the Northern cities. There were also many social and cultural differences between the rural South and urban North that were shocking and certainly inhospitable to
the newly transplanted African American community, which was still tied very closely to the South through bonds of culture and heritage.

When a group finds itself displaced geographically as the African American community was from the rural South during the Great Migration, a psychological vacuum opens that forces the community to reshape the way it sees itself, and without a stable environment to provide context, this redefinition can be a difficult procedure. In fact, this period of being in-between – which I refer to as a “liminal state” suggestive of dwelling on a threshold, moving from one place to another and existing in a state of flux or transit – is an incredibly rich moment in the life of a culture. Liminality is typically used in reference to a person’s psychological state, but I propose that it can be applied to an entire community as well. During liminal periods, certain boundaries become partially suspended. Essentially, due to The Great Migration the African American community, though still rooted in the South, was making an incursion into the North, leaving the identity of the community in a state of liminality. Jean Toomer was able to capture the complexity of this liminality and its implications for the transformation of the African American community’s psyche in the many poems, character sketches, and short stories, as well as a dramatic novella, that comprise the book *Cane*.

Toomer himself witnessed some of the causes and effects of the Great Migration when he spent eight months working as a substitute principal for an all-black college in the rural town of Sparta, Georgia, in 1921, as well as during his more permanent residences in the urban centers of Chicago and Washington, D.C. From his tenure in Sparta, he drew much of the inspiration for the first and lasts sections of *Cane*, while Part Two reflects his experiences as a young man in the cities. The novel was published in its
entirety the year after his trip to Georgia. Thus the text's conception and production occur in tandem with The Great Migration. *Cane*, however, goes beyond simply documenting an historic event to illustrate the complex and conflicted emotional and psychological circumstances experienced by the black community. The rural, agrarian environment of the South had shaped the identity of the African American community, just as the shaggy pines and the sugar cane fields shape the atmosphere in parts of Toomer's book. The connection between the people and the land is palpable in *Cane*, and the relocation of the African American community somewhere away from its home in the South destabilizes several aspects of the community's identity, leaving it in a disjointed state.

One strong characteristic of a psyche, or in this case a community, caught in liminality is this marked sense of fragmentation of self. The African American community was attempting to combine the values, practices, and social norms of their old home in the rural South with their new home in the urban North, and the two could not easily be reconciled. The African American persona, pulled in two opposite directions and thus fragmented as it is represented in *Cane*, is well served by the tropes of the Modernist movement which appear frequently in Toomer's text. The goals of Modernism are not to provide answers in the form of neat, pleasantly satisfying plots. Instead, Modern artists and authors seek to lay bare the flaws and problems that ultimately lead to a fragmented identity and a failure to achieve wholeness, both at the level of the individual and the community. *Cane* fits into the mold of the Modernist text and uses the tenets of Modernism to express the anxiety and discontent Toomer felt for and in the African American community as it looked into the future from within the turmoil of the Great Migration and the changing definition of race in the 1920s. The text of *Cane*
certainly raises more questions than it answers, and the questions that it does manage to
answer are not necessarily answered in the affirmative. *Cane* is a text about a community
seeking but not finding, leaving but not arriving, a community lost in geographical space,
unless for the time being.

Modernism also adheres to the tenet that form should enhance function, that is,
the literal structure of the text should actively contribute to the meaning expressed
therein. Toomer's text does just this: the different pieces do not flow into one unified
narrative. Instead, *Cane* is a veritable montage of poems, character sketches, and brief
stories, as well as a kind of dramatized novella, all expressing the same theme but
refusing to resolve into uniformity. However, despite its fractured structure, the text
contains a strong sense of thematic unity. The images, symbols, and characters are all
echoes and distortions of one another, suggesting that the text simultaneously strives for
wholeness even as it rends itself apart. This condition epitomizes the conflicted state of
the African American community on yet another plane, and allows the text to represent
itself as liminal at the very level of its form.

Along with its strong thematic unity, the narrator's voice is another one of the
threads that weaves through the entire text; like the theme, the narrator's voice is always
present and a fairly strong element to each piece; unlike the theme, the narrator's voice is
never stable. Instead, the voice is changing all the time. The narrator's voice modulates to
suit its subject as it carries the reader through the rural Southern neighborhoods, up into
the urban city streets, and then back again into Kabnis' cabin. The narratorial voice can
be a problematic aspect of *Cane*, precisely because the voice is so varied. The theory that
*Cane* contains more than one narrator is certainly viable. As William Dow points out in
his article, "‘Always Your Heart’: The ‘Great Design’ of Toomer’s Cane," the text features first-, second-, and third-person narrators and modalities that freely alternate and conflate in fluid and interactive ways (85). However, Dow also consistently uses the term “narrator” rather than “narrators” in his essay, viewing these shifting voices as parts of one single narrative consciousness, a consciousness that is very close to the author’s own identity. Like Dow, I will use the term “narrator” to refer to one fluctuating voice that accompanies the reader throughout the entire text. I view this voice as Toomer’s consciousness assuming various narrative positions with each new sketch, almost as if it takes up and changes masks between each piece. Dow claims that the function of such a fluid narrator allows Toomer to “articulate modes of narrative authority and patterns of feeling that directly modify not how we understand the world so much as how we engage it” (60). The different discourses taken up by the narrator are one means through which these patterns of feeling, as Dow puts it, are expressed. The central focus of this thesis will be to analyze certain patterns I see emerging in the language and imagery used by Toomer’s narrator. That is, I will perform an examination of the content of the narrator’s message, the means by which this content is delivered, and the competing ideologies operating therein. I will consider the way Cane’s language expresses liminality as it varies from piece to piece and then changes even more as it moves from Part One to Part Two to Part Three of the book.

Instead of looking at discourse in a strictly Foucaultian sense, that is, in terms focused on power, the ideologies embedded in the narrator’s discourse will be the primary focus of my analysis. When I use the term “discourse,” I am referring to the particular value systems permeating the narrator’s language. Toomer carefully constructs
his narrator’s voice to modulate or alter itself between each piece. Besides expressing patterns of feeling, as Dow puts it, the narrator’s multiple voices also reflect different aspects and values of the subject being described by the author. Toomer attends to the voices of his characters, indirectly revealing certain qualities and characteristics of their personae through their own voices, in addition to the voice the narrator uses when describing them. This intricate use of both diagesis and mimesis aptly reflects the complicated nature of the subject of Cane; the community was in a state of upheaval trying to pull together the fragmented pieces of its identity and reassemble itself into a whole once again. This process involves an examination of the various fragments being assembled, which is essentially what Cane offers to the reader. Each piece, be it a poem, vignette, character sketch, or drama, offers a glimpse at one aspect of the African American community’s psyche. These fragments reveal where the values of the community lie in the past and point to where they may be going in the future. For instance, narrator’s discourse in most of Part One heavily values the rural and the spiritual ideologies, veritably dripping with nostalgia for the heritage and roots that are being left behind. The story that concludes Part One, “Blood Burning Moon” complicates this tendency by focusing on the harsh realities of social violence and sexual tension between the black and white communities in the rural South, and I will discuss the thematic implications of that piece in Chapter Two. In contrast to the majority of Part One, Part Two features language that emphasizes the values of the urban and the materialistic. Not only does the text’s subject shift between the first and second sections of the book, but the narrator’s attitude shifts as well. This change in attitude is indicated very distinctly through the continuing modulation of the narrative voice.
When looking so closely at the narrator’s discourse and how the noticeable modulations of this narrative voice produce meaning, the work of M. M. Bakhtin is very helpful. Bakhtin proposed that the novel is a carnivalesque arena where many voices emerge, interact, and compete with each other for a stake in the meaning of the text. This heteroglossia allows the author to illustrate the various value systems competing in the novel as they are expressed through the various voices or discourses contained therein. These different discourses arise and interact when, as in Cane, one narrator’s voice is altered deliberately by the author to express different value systems at different times. Thus from one narrator, a variety of value systems can be introduced into the text at one time or another. In “The Dialogic Imagination,” Bakhtin lays out a point that is very useful to my analysis of Cane:

In any given historical moment of verbal-ideological life, each generation at each social level has its own language; moreover, every age group has as a matter of fact its own language, its own vocabulary, its own particular accentual system that, in their turn, vary depending on social level, academic institution…and other stratifying factors (290).

In this statement, Bakhtin describes what Toomer achieves by modulating the voice of his narrator throughout the text. Toomer uses the narrator’s voice to tap into various value systems that reflect the social level and, I would argue, social situation, of his subjects. In the case of Cane, I would identify one of the “other stratifying factors” Bakhtin mentions as geographical location. So as we move through readings of various pieces from each section of Cane, my attention will focus on what values the particular narrative discourse of that piece seem to be promoting within the context of the geography, region, and social
setting of the piece. These values are the various fragmented pieces that the African American community was trying to reconcile as it moved through the Great Migration, so often these concepts will come into conflict with each other, creating a very palpable tension. I find this tension strongest between the value system that dominates Part One, that of the rural and the spiritual, and that which dominates Part Two, the urban and materialistic. These concepts seem to represent the past and the future as they appeared to the African American community suspended in a liminal state. The values embedded in the points of view of the various modulations of the narrative voice, all crafted by Toomer to be lenses through which readers would see the characters and images of his book, reflect the rich complexity of the cultural context from which *Cane* was born.

Toomer's technique of modulating the narrator's voice effectively creates a feeling of a montage rather than a novel, yet the textual montage that is *Cane* still exhibits behavior that aligns with Bakhtin's definition of the heteroglossic text. Toomer's montage is represented through the use of different genres, different types of poems, and different story lines, each presented by the narrator, whose voice has been carefully tailored by the author to reflect a specific value system or social position. All of the discourses present in the heteroglossic text, Bakhtin claims, are specific points of view, forms for conceptualizing the world in words (291-2). Along with the montage element of the text, Toomer also uses the language of *Cane* to create a portrait of a multi-faceted and fragmented community. His finished product resembles the Cubist works of painters like Pablo Picasso more than any traditional realist art. Picasso also participated in the Modernist movement as his art abandoned convention and demonstrated the idea of form following function as it strove to show its subject from all sides at once; the function was
to show that nothing has only one side, and so the form carried out this belief by simultaneously revealing multiple sides of one figure. When Toomer wrote *Cane* he mimicked this concept in a way, again allowing the form of his text to reinforce the function as he tried to create a verbal portrait of the African American community during the period of the Great Migration. Such a complex subject obviously would have multiple “sides” or aspects, and thus could not be faithfully represented through one central protagonist. Instead, the complex community is represented through an interconnected network of individual pieces, the fragments of the community that more accurately reflect its current state. Often these pieces demonstrate a very complicated relationship to one another. In any heteroglossic text, Bakhtin points out, the competing discourses will, at any given time, juxtapose one another, “mutually supplement one another, contradict one another and be interrelated dialogically” (292). This is certainly true in the way Toomer has crafted *Cane* to speak with many voices rather than just one.

Particularly, I would like to apply Bakhtin’s ideas to focus on the way the language and discourse of Toomer’s text capture the liminal moment created by the cultural shift that the African American community was experiencing during the Great Migration. A shift was occurring not only at the literal level of geography, but more importantly at the intangible level of culture, that is, the community’s very identity was transforming and thus destabilizing various aspects that used to clearly define it. Toomer’s text tracks and reflects this shift through the evolution of its language and the systems of discourse operating therein. Even as the text as a whole comprises a symphony of voices, albeit a rather dissonant symphony at times, each occupies a particular position, and these positions are arranged in a meaningful pattern. My analysis
of this pattern, its evolution and its greater thematic significance will comprise one of my main purposes in this paper, which will assume the following structure.

To begin, I will explore the way the first section of *Cane* is steeped in dusky, sensual, twilight imagery. Language and imagery valuing spirituality and nature are given more value than their binary opposites, the materialistic and urban. When used in this essay, the term "spirituality" does not signify a specifically religious concept. I use the word "spirituality" to refer generally to things related to the soul, the *spiritus communitas* the non-corporeal, intangible part of the identity related to the soul. Spirituality, in this essay, taps into ancestry, song, heritage, and folk beliefs, along with a mystical connection between the land and the soul. These areas comprise large portions of the foundations of the African American community's identity. The spiritual and pastoral discourses and images used by the narrator in Part One are accompanied by pervasive dusk imagery that signals the demise of this way of life and also by a sensuality that signals an undeniable life-force still present, though perhaps unsure of its future.

The language used throughout the character sketches, short stories, and poems of Part One suggests that though the land is still alive and the people's connection to it is strong, the sun is permanently setting on this place and the way of life that once belonged to it. This same imagery is described using language that infuses a salient sense of sexuality into the connotation of the land; a connection between *Cane*’s female characters and the conceit of the Earth Mother is frequently underscored by the narrator. This is both helpful and problematic to Toomer's purpose, as women are depicted as vital to the life force of the community but also as objects of abuse and violence. Vignettes featuring the female characters Karintha, Becky, and Fern help to express a complex sense of identity
and place along with poems like "Reapers," "November Cotton Flower," and "Face." The short story "Blood-Burning Moon" brings the tensions of this section to a crescendo and demonstrates how the rural South has been corrupted and can no longer function as a nurturing home ground for the African American community.

I have chosen to use close reading to analyze only some of the pieces in Cane, though the patterns and ideological behavior I identify can be found throughout the entire text. My aim in selecting shorter pieces like vignettes and poems rather than the longer, more complex stories is to isolate and explore various aspects of the ideological binaries I have identified as the central focus of this thesis. Even when I discuss complex stories, such as "Blood Burning Moon," I am deliberately focusing my analysis on the aspects of the story that lay within the boundaries of my argument. A close examination of the language and imagery of the pieces featured in Part One of this essay ultimately aims to explore the dusky quality of twilight that is Toomer's swan song to the rural South. But Toomer leaves this place, allowing it to continue its journey – sometimes perilous, sometimes graceful – through the dusk and into night, as he shifts his text to look Northward.

The dusk imagery heralds a transition to the decidedly urban environs of Part Two where, again, I will select a few shorter pieces to illustrate a larger linguistic pattern. In this section, the text reflects the intense disruption, confusion, and dismay that the African American community experiences as a direct consequence of entering a liminal state during the Great Migration. In the urban centers there is a lack of stability, but also a potential for an important relocation of power. That locus of power must be established for the African American community to regain a cultural foothold in the greater
American identity and continue to evolve, since its time in the rural South has died out. The potential held by the urban North to become the new home ground for the community is explored in the second part of the book. Part Two relies more heavily on language of the urban and the physical or materialistic, and the sensual tones present in the imagery of Part One are absent here. The narrator's voice, modulated in a variety of ways to suit this new environment, does not value these new ideologies. Instead, life for the African American community in the second part of *Cane* is represented in terms of its flaws and its tendency to create confusion and complication at the level of identity rather than its ability to provide satisfactory foundations for the community. In her essay *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison comments, "Writers transform aspects of their social grounding into aspects of language, and the way they tell their stories...limns out all sorts of debates blanketed in their text" (4). *Cane* demonstrates this fusion of social and linguistic aspects, particularly as Toomer juxtaposes the dusky, twilight atmosphere of the rural South with a harder, faster sense of place radiating from the nascent urban African American communities forming in Washington D.C. and Chicago.

These urban social centers that comprise the setting of Part Two contrast sharply with the rural South. The nature of Toomer's characterization of this new landscape suggests that it ultimately does not prove to be a satisfactory replacement for the rural South and the spiritual fecundity the African American community left there. The modulated narrative voice in the vignettes "Seventh Street," "Rhobert," and "Calling Jesus," along with the speaker of the poems "Beehive" and "Harvest Song," expresses different aspects of the urban, Northern setting and especially point to the failure, at the time, of this place to provide an adequate spiritual home for the African American
community as in the South. In Part Two of *Cane*, the community’s identity is forced to transform to fit into its new environs, and Toomer uses the discourses in this part of the text to reflect the discomfort inherent in this involuntary adaptation.

Part Three of *Cane*, which is comprised only of the dramatic piece “Kabnis,” is rife with tension generated by the protagonist’s inability to reconcile the disparate parts of his own identity, expressed through many of the competing discursive value systems introduced in the earlier two sections. Part Three of *Cane* calls for a closer look at Toomer the man, since Toomer himself declared “Kabnis is *Me*” to his friend and fellow author Waldo Frank in an undated letter written some time just prior to the book’s first publication (Toomer 151). Many of the personal conflicts that would plague Toomer all his life are presented in the central character of Ralph Kabnis. This final section demonstrates just how closely identity and language are connected and how both express the growing pains of a community caught in the middle of a major transition. My analysis will focus mainly on the first and last scenes of this drama as they offer the most direct and protracted instances of the protagonist’s inability to reconcile his heritage with his identity. Kabnis, the character who gives his name to this last piece, is the product of the Great Migration in that his identity is woefully fragmented, and his struggle to articulate who he is and decide if and how he can fit into the rural Southern community after being raised in the urban North illustrates the problems Toomer anticipated arising out of the Great Migration for his community. Though he resembles Toomer, Kabnis and his situation take on almost a grotesque nature as they comprise a caricature of dysfunction between individual and community: Kabnis is a lost, miserable soul with no physical or
spiritual home ground, and though his section ends wreathed in dawn imagery, the text does not leave the reader feeling hopeful or uplifted.

As I examine each part of *Cane* individually and then hold all three up to each other for comparison, Stephen Greenblatt’s essay “Towards a Poetics of Culture” will be helpful as it outlines the idea that many texts exhibit a dynamic oscillation between value systems as the narrator’s discourse modulates itself according to his subject. Greenblatt uses the terms *currency* and *negotiation* in his essay; these will be useful along with the concept of “truth value,” which acknowledges the connection between power and truth, and the subjective nature of both of these concepts. In Toomer’s text, the author uses the narrative voice to grant greater truth value, and thus more power, to certain ideologies. Truth, in this sense, is less of an objective statement and more of one perspective or interpretation based on the narrator’s voice and the values reflected therein. I would also like to introduce my own term, *linguistic economy*, to describe the balance (or imbalance, as it were) of power and the interaction between the various discourses in the text. If the novel is a heteroglossic arena as Bakhtin suggests, then each voice contained therein is vying with the others for a kind of linguistic capital that awards value, and thus power, within the context of the novel as a whole.

Bearing in mind the idea of the novel as an arena where different voices or discourses compete for power, I argue that the particular narrative discourses in Toomer’s text interact in a very interesting and specific way. At first they seem to interact as binaries, some of most important being the pairs of black/white, dawn/dusk, urban/rural, and spiritual/material. Every section of *Cane*, whether it is a vignette, poem, or drama, deals with the conflict of these oppositional discourses at some level, and as the text
unfolds, the locus of value moves back and forth along each imaginary continuum with opposite concepts, both vying for discursive power, at each pole. Instead of one of these discourses being clearly dominant, there is always an unresolved tension as power is located somewhere in between the two competing binaries. In creating this unstable oscillation between various binaries, Toomer suggests that the validity of all binaries, most importantly the black/white binary, should be questioned.

By constructing fluid continuums and placing the narrator's values at shifting points along these lines, the text denies power or mastery to one discourse alone, and instead demonstrates that the text, mirroring life and Bakhtin's concept of a dialogic novel, is made up of many competing discourses. By deconstructing these binary relationships in the text and favoring the alternative mode of a continuum, *Cane* tolerates and even encourages a great amount of fluidity in terms of discursive power, which in turn has a noted impact on the construction and performance of identity. The fact that race is a fluid concept was an idea just emerging when Toomer was writing *Cane*, and the text seems to pick up and promote the idea that many aspects of identity, particularly the racial components, were more successfully placed on a fluid continuum rather than a static binary. Dow suggests that the purpose of Toomer's fragmented narratorial voice is another component in the productive rewriting of "race," which allows for the recognition of multiple authentic African American voices, identifications complicated by class, gender, geography, and greatly enriched by the significant modulations in narrative voice that Toomer crafts (60). An analysis of the natures of the discourses used by these varying voices and their interactions with each other will illuminate how the linguistic economy of the novel mirrors the social values and tensions of the time and
place where the book was written, and this will point toward the sense of liminality born out of the Great Migration as the source of the tension and instability. The omnipresence of these competing binaries within a discursive fluidity significantly contributes to the thematic unity of the text.

The world Toomer presents in *Cane* is one of gradations, variations along a continuum of linguistic power. The competing binaries in his text parallel the condition of the writer himself, as Toomer saw himself as an heir to more than one culture, several literary traditions, and many "races" (Fabre and Feith 5). In the essay "Tight Lipped Oracle" by Genevieve Fabre and Michel Feith, the authors point out that Toomer experienced at his own expense the difficulties of proclaiming oneself neither white nor black, and his text picks up the threads of this experience and weaves them into its themes. Thus, Toomer created a text that existed in a state of geographical, personal, cultural, and discursive liminality. In *Cane*, the discursive value always resides in the space between any two given binary poles, never establishing one as entirely dominant. The fact that the language of his text moves along a continuum reflects his feelings that identity could do the same, particularly in terms of race. The text's behavior in this sense has a very clear purpose: to force attention to the arbitrary nature of boundaries and categories that define individuals as either/or and thereby to deny the validity of polar opposites. Dow argues that Toomer saw his artistic role as "an interracial negotiator and unifier of representational identity" (61), and to that effect, Toomer's shifting narrators could represent the author's attempt at a kind of inter-racial unity in which the "I" and "you" can be represented by the same voice (61)."
In drawing his fragmented, Cubist portrait of the African American community and representing it along the various binary continua of values, one large obstacle Toomer had to overcome was how to define the people when they were torn away from the land that had been such a large part of who they were up to that point in time. Here the previously-defined spirituality becomes a critical element in the construction of both the idea of place and the identity of community. Again, in the context of this essay, "spirituality" must be understood to mean the soul's mystical connection to the past, the land, and the rest of the community. Though an abstract entity, this spirituality proves to be the adhesive that binds a people both to each other and to their homeland. One of the main points that the text seems to prove is that, in the case of the African American community, identity is tied to place and can only flourish with the sense of place to nourish it. In the abstract, this concept may seem too obvious to be the impetus for an entire text, yet Cane finds and draws out the tensions of this simple idea and demonstrates how, when abstract becomes concrete (or when the concrete gets necessarily abstracted), the relationship between a community and its environment is anything but easy.
CHAPTER TWO – Folk Songs at Dusk: A Portrait of Rural Georgia

The first portion of *Cane* is devoted to the depiction of the rural South, the environment that nourished the African American community spiritually, though not socially. Not only does the text represent that landscape as a dying place, but also as a place that bred pain, violence, and terror for the black people who lived there. The African American community may have been tied to the land of the rural South, but the social conditions there were intolerable, so even the place that had become a kind of surrogate homeland was not actually safe ground.

The first section of *Cane* captures this sense of anxiety and discomfort in the way that it is steeped in dusky, twilight imagery. The language used throughout the character sketches, short stories, and poems of this part of the book becomes a swan song: it forms one last beautiful surge of life before an inevitably approaching end. The impetus that motivated the Great Migration is drawn out here so that the audience may experience the strong sense of sadness and understand why many members of the African American community were left with no choice but to leave their home land in the South. The social dynamics both within the African American community and between the African American and white factions of the rural South are illustrated in the first part of the book through a variety of channels.

The language of Part One carries within it a system of power conveyed primarily through subtext. Specifically, the frequent use of imagery and language related to darkness complements and enhances imagery of the rural, the sensual, and the spiritual. These are the discourses that are given power and reverence in the linguistic economy of this section. The text gives homage to the dynasty of the agrarian South as it collapses.
Toomer deliberately chooses language to construct the community’s identity; the rural landscape that was once the home ground of the African American people, after enduring decades of slavery, is saturated with evil driven by intolerance and hatred; in the face of this antagonistic specter, Toomer’s text suggests that a stalwart bond to the land itself and an intense sense of spirituality were both sources of strength and protection for the African American community. That spiritually is not the adherence to a prescribed religion but a sense of unity with the earth, the past, and the rest of the community. This relationship is played out at the level of plot and discourse, as well as across, above, and beneath the surface of the text of the first part of *Cane*.

Karintha is the first character that Toomer sketches. A strong and beautiful character, she merits description dominated by sensual, rural imagery. She is perfect “as dusk,” she is a thing that will “ripen,” she moves “like a black bird,” she runs with the “sound of the red dust,” and she is “innocently lovely as a November cotton flower” (3). These pastoral images pour from the page in an intense torrent of poetic diction. The association with nature is a powerful one; this discourse is highly valued by the narrative voice as the qualities of strength and beauty inherent in nature are bestowed on the protagonist. Because she so closely resembles the land that she comes from, the narrator values and admires Karintha. The sensual aspect to Karintha’s description is significant as well. Toomer presents sexuality as a natural force, one that reinforces the connection to the earth and the community; sensuality is not a shameful quality.

Karintha’s sensual beauty, though emphasized throughout the sketch, becomes problematic when the narrator reveals that “the soul of her was a growing thing ripened too soon,” and that by the time she is twenty, she has become pregnant and lost or killed
the baby (Toomer 4). The text is deliberately ambiguous about the event, revealing only that “a child fell out of her womb” (4). We are given many negative details about Karintha’s life, for instance she had a child which did not live, she hurls stones at cows, and she has been married many times. However, the final image of the character sketch is of “Karintha at twenty, carrying beauty, perfect as dusk when the sun goes down” (4). The beauty is present, but tinctured with a sadness that was not obvious at first. The natural side of her is beautiful; even her flaw, her pregnancy out of wedlock, enters the narrative as if it were an organic occurrence. The narrator is careful never to blame Karintha for becoming pregnant; the event is alluded to only as an eventuality of which she was merely the object. For all of the power bestowed on her for being a creature closely tied to nature (and her sexuality empowers her even more), here the text demonstrates how she is also at the mercy of a force greater than herself. In this sense, her story mirrors that of the African American community: tied closely to the earth, and beautiful because of it, but also bound to accept the ill fortune along with the good as nature will inevitably move through cycles.

Toomer’s characterization of Karintha as a sensual and sexual subject invites consideration of his attitude toward and portrayal of women in Cane. Though that topic is broad and complex, and its exploration lays mainly beyond the boundaries of my focus in this thesis, the role of women in the text does intersect with the role of language, and in this capacity it has significance to my argument. Many images in Part One evoke the sensation of a deathly pall drawing over the land, but others carry clear notes of visceral, instinctual sensuality, especially in the language Toomer uses to describe the natural world. This natural, sexual discourse is the language used to describe the women in Part
One; quasi-erotic sensory images are frequently part of the narrator’s tone. For instance, Karintha is a woman “ripened” too soon (4), and the curves of Fern’s profile flow “like mobile rivers” (16). Later, the narrator of “Kabnis” describes how the night “throbs evenly against the torso of the South” like the “soft belly of a pregnant Negress” (105). The prevalence of sensuality running through the rural discourse demonstrates the mystical significance Toomer places on women. Like Karintha, whom we have already met, and like Becky and Fern who I will discuss shortly, Toomer’s women all seem to be instinctive, passionate creatures. Each is a different variation of the Earth Mother figure. In this sense, the women’s presence is very important to the spirituality of the community: for the characters in the book, a literal connection to a woman is a symbolic connection to the land. Sexuality is not associated with sinfulness in this context. It is an expression of a natural being, and in that capacity it is an important element of spirituality. Women like Karintha and Becky seem naturally inclined to reproduce, and rather than condemning this behavior, the text’s tone and imagery celebrate sensuality as a signal of hope and life. Toomer seems to suggest that it is the natural role of women to reproduce, and in obeying this urge, they are affirming the significance of their social and spiritual role in the community.

However, these fertile, Earth Mother figures are simultaneously stripped of another form of power in the text as they are prohibited from developing into complex and unique characters. Instead of becoming individuals, women are the subjects of the natural, sensual discourse: focal points for the spiritual community but incomplete characters. The duality of the woman’s position within the community is also represented in the way that the sensual language is woven into the images of sunsets and dying
daylight. The life force represented by the sensual language of Part One is present, but it is the very subject of the swan song. The text vacillates between celebrating and mourning the way of life being left behind in the rural South. In the new communities being established in the urban North, the role of women – their centrality and their spiritual status as Earth Mother figures – may not be maintained. Yet these circumstances may offer women the opportunity to transcend such prescribed stereotypes and develop more fully into individuals. The text seems content to raise questions of how the role of women will change after the Great Migration without indicating clear answers. Bearing all of this in mind, we can now return our focus to Karintha and the twilight that encloses her. Such a setting foreshadows the fact that her story will not end completely happily, and the pain she endures seems to be woven into her beauty and the very language that describes her, giving it strength and depth.

The incorporation of lyrics into the text also brings complexity to the “Karintha” sketch and serves as a reminder that Cane makes use of the tropes of Modernism to express its message, as the text was written in the early 1920’s and captures the essence of upheaval and revolution in the literary arena as well. The piece begins with a portion of a song, “Her skin is like dusk on the eastern horizon / When the sun goes down” (Toomer 3). It should be noted that Toomer uses this technique frequently: “Carma,” “Becky,” and “Blood Burning Moon” are all punctuated by the repetition of lyrics. In the case of “Karintha,” the dusk imagery is foregrounded as the opening lyrical quotation invites the reader to put the rest of the description of Karintha into the context of this mournful song. The lyrics are repeated twice more in the short sketch, once in the middle and once at the end, so the twilight becomes a frame for the character, and also
challenges the audience by refusing to allow the text to settle comfortably into one familiar form. The lyrics are used in a similar fashion in “Carma,” “Becky,” and “Blood Burning Moon,” weaving their content and the soulfulness they carry into the experiences of the characters. Parts of “Karintha” feel like a spiritual song, emphasizing the importance of spirituality to this community, and other parts feel like a descriptive verbal portrait, drawing on poetic imagery and specific sensory language that is intensely visceral. Songs and music seem to be one foundational element to the community’s spirituality and unity. Lyrics to African American spirituals occur frequently in Cane in order to underscore the intensity of the narrator’s emotions, and music is closely related to the Earth Mother figures as well, not only in the case of Karintha which I have just mentioned, but also for Carma, whose “body is a song” (12) and for Fern, who the narrator sees as “a Jewish cantor singing with a broken voice” and calling out to Jesus (19). This aspect of Cane appeals to both the spiritual and physical senses of Toomer’s audience through the natural imagery and the spiritual song lyrics, suggesting that both are important components necessary to understand the change the community’s identity is experiencing during the Great Migration.

In his sketch of Karintha, Toomer fuses the discourse of the rural with the imagery of darkness, that is, the dying, dusky language of smoke and twilight, to express subtly how this landscape will not last. Karintha is a November cotton flower, she is a black bird flashing in the light, and she is a growing thing, ripened too soon (3). The image of the November cotton flower deserves particular attention; it is introduced here and reinforced later in Part One when Toomer includes a poem titled after that same flower and possibly alluded to again when Toomer describes the character Carma as
having a “yellow flower face” (12). One of the beautiful things about the text of Cane is the way the literary pieces engage in a dialogue of sorts with each other. Images and phrases and characters echo and refract and almost seem to haunt the text with their reoccurring presence. The November cotton flower is one of those motifs. The flower, blooming in November, is not blooming during the proper season, though through no fault of its own. Like Karintha and Carma, the text seems to imply that the flower was made a certain way and has no choice but to live out its natural destiny. By the time its bud blooms in November, the colder months are swiftly approaching, and it has no chance to live a long life. To an observer, the flower might look sad but brave as it grows out of the ground, patiently awaiting its fate. Yet in the text, Karintha is “innocently lovely as the November cotton flower” (3). Toomer reminds us that the flower may not be aware of the tragedy of its situation, and thus suggests that Karintha too does not see herself as an icon, though the audience may read her as such. Part of her beauty comes from the very lack of awareness that keeps her from seeing or dwelling on the tragedy of her situation, though her restlessness as she moves from man to man suggests that she may not be entirely content; her melancholy becomes another layer of her beauty and her complexity.

All of the imagery used to describe this first protagonist is, as previously noted, related to the country landscape and to nature. But Toomer complicates the typical pastoral by allowing his nature imagery to symbolize more than a pastoral purity and simplicity. Toomer’s rural land is steeped in spirituality — that connection between soul, land, song, community, and individual; the land is awash in the blood and smoke and shadows that represent the violent and painful heritage the African American community
experienced under the institution of slavery. Spirituality unites the land and the individual, and thus carries the most value in the economy of the discourse featured in the first part of the text. The community’s identity is changing, and the language that can capture the way this change feels, representing the tense and complicated social state at that time, that language has the most truth value, and thus the most power. By using Karintha’s portrait as the opening scene, Toomer introduces the symbolic role of the dusk imagery and then galvanizes it with social and spiritual significance. Where there is dusk, there is beauty infused with sadness and strength as “the sun goes down” (4) and marks the inevitability of death even for the most sensual, vivacious character. Beauty is ruined but it tries to persevere, innocent and lovely as the cotton flower trying to grow in November (3); and since the entire first section of Cane is swathed in a pall of dusk, a reader can imagine that the fate of Karintha is meant to be projected, albeit in an abstract way, onto the other characters of the story, all of whom, it should be noted, live in the fictional town of Sempter, Georgia.

Sempter is the epitome of the rural South during the early 20th century. In her 1995 article “Toomer’s Sparta,” Barbara Foley suggests that the author was inspired to write the first pieces of Cane while he lived in the town of Sparta, Georgia, for three months in 1921 serving as substitute principal for the Sparta Agricultural and Industrial Institute (Foley 747). According to Foley, Toomer would have seen the town and its residents, both white and black, first hand, and sought to use them as the basis for his text. However, in the article “’Been Shapin Words T Fit M Soul’ Cane, Language, and Social Change,” Mary Battenfeld makes an opposing argument, asserting that “Cane is usually not linked to political and economic conditions, or to Toomer’s vision for social
change... The aesthetics, rather than the material conditions, of Toomer’s time are seen as *Cane’s roots* (1239). Battenfeld makes a valid point that aesthetics are a very powerful and expressive aspect of *Cane*, yet in a bald oversight she denies that the text is an expression of Toomer’s vision for social change. Toomer’s text conveys a clear commentary on the condition of the black community when he was writing, as well as offers a solution as to where it must go in order to sustain itself. Namely, Toomer demonstrates that the community’s identity must not adhere to rigid, confining absolutes to define it, but rather a more fluid, inclusive attitude should be fostered for complex concepts like race and culture. Perhaps Battenfeld’s comment referred to the fact that Toomer’s text is devoid of the language of political or social change. However, when we read his text not with an eye for his personal opinions, but as evidence of the racial dynamics at work during the early 20th century, we find the slant of his social and political convictions embedded in the very imagery and description he uses to construct the aesthetics.

The first instance of this language was introduced in Karintha’s dusky, rural environs, and that motif is developed through the rest of Part One. This pending darkness falling on the rural landscape silently suggests an irreversible finality encroaching on these people in this place. The light filling the images of “Karintha” is waning and ephemeral. The text always refers to “dusk” when it describes the twilight, pointedly asserting that it is the harbinger of night, not of dawn. Yet night is the period when darkness is normal, and suddenly a conflict in the text arises over whether, for the black community, this oncoming epoch of darkness is meant to be read as a positive or negative development. Since Toomer seems to be more interested in using images that operate on
the symbolic and mythical level, I would argue that the darkness is meant to be read with
a negative connotation rather than a positive one. However, the text seems to create
tension around the potential duality of darkness; the concept is linked to night and death,
but it also describes the complexion of the community being represented. This contrast
between life and death, both associated with forms of darkness in Cane, is sustained
throughout the text, bringing new depth and complexity to the symbol of darkness as it is
used to tincture Toomer’s swan song to the rural South.

Immediately following “Karintha” is a short poem that again capitalizes on
Toomer’s ability to manipulate language to express the complexity of the social situation
in the South. The poem, “Reapers,” begins, “Black reapers with the sound of steel on
stones / Are sharpening their scythes. I see them place the hones / In their hip-pockets as
a thing that’s done” (Toomer 5). The language in these lines is especially rich in that each
phrase invites multiple readings. The black reapers and their scythes can either refer to
African American men and women working in the fields during a harvest, or to the
archetypal personification of death. The way the whetstones rest in their hip-pockets “as a
thing that’s done” can either be taken as the accepted behavior of the time, or as a task
that has been brought decisively to a close. These multiple meanings cause the text to
create ambiguity rather than stable meaning. There is motion in the lines as their
meanings shift from one reading to another, suggesting a parallel to the movement of the
black community during the Great Migration. The text cannot resolve itself, and this
tension creates a point of entry from which to examine its psychological and sociological
goals: the poem’s meaning remains suspended between multiple interpretations, just as
many African Americans in the South felt they no longer had a home in the place that had
once nurtured them, and so they were forced to leave. The striking parallel between loss of place and loss of identity is expressed at various levels of the text, and “Reapers” offers one of the more salient points of this symbolic connection.

Another point raised but never answered in “Reapers” focuses on the concepts of the human versus the mechanical. These two ideologies compete for more value in the linguistic economy, and this poem is one of their battlegrounds. The discourse and ideology that values nature comes into conflict with the cold, unconscious mowing machine made of steel, which lacks any kind of soul and thus cannot achieve any kind of spirituality. The speaker’s attitude toward this soulless machine seems ambivalent: he resists allowing the human or the mechanical to entirely dominate his value system, but instead maintains a liminal state. Later in Part Two this conflict will merge into the larger ideological conflict of urban versus rural as the text demonstrates how the urban sense of place lacks any spiritual component, a condition that eventually transfers into the inhabitants of such environs. And even this early in the text, many pages before the urban element is explored in earnest, the tension between this binary pair begins to emerge in the discourse and imagery of the poem; the mechanical or non-spiritual is represented as the antagonist and exhibits predatory behavior over a living creature, yet one has to ask if an unemotional state might be preferable, given all the sadness infused in the atmosphere of the South and undoubtedly experienced by those living there.

In the first half of “Reapers,” the workers in the field are the focus; they sharpen their scythes and begin their labor. However, in the second half, a contrasting image of unfeeling machinery is introduced: “Black horses drive a mower through the weeds, / And there, a field rat, startled, squeaking bleeds, / His belly close to the ground. I see the
blade / Blood-stained, continue cutting weeds and shade” (Toomer 5). The mowing machine is the central image in this part of the poem, standing in stark relief against the reapers described previously. Though humans may control the horses driving the machine, the speaker never mentions them; instead, he emphasizes the machine itself and its contrast to the reapers. The mowing machine performs the same action as the reapers, and both work methodically, the reapers with their “silent swinging” and the mower as it cuts “weed and shade” and rat alike. Yet the mowing machine is depicted as the aggressor because it injures the innocent and unsuspecting field rat. The poem contains a distinct allusion to traditional farming practices of the Old South giving way to modern, more mechanized means of operation, the very revolution that is partly responsible for the Great Migration. Among the many points this poem raises, one of the strongest may be a warning against replacing the human with the machine. In the image of the rat bleeding in the grass, the poem illustrates what the cost of a society dependent on technology might be for living creatures. It is also significant that the image of the mower comes after the image of the reapers; by giving us the mowing machine and the bleeding rat as the final images, Toomer seems to be suggesting that the reapers, along with the era in which they and their values were dominant, have now been usurped by the mechanical age.

The sequence both within Toomer’s pieces and of the pieces themselves in relation to the whole text is another important element of Cane that must not go unaddressed. The montage style that gives readers a patchwork of poem, vignette, and story is another Modern element of the text; the format itself is fragmented to offer a Cubist or shattered version of the African American community, which is apt considering
the fractured nature of the community as it is forced out of its home land. For instance, it is not insignificant that it is the dusk imagery of “Karintha” that leads directly into the ambiguity of “Reapers,” a piece where meaning is unstable and motion is possible. Here the liminal state of the text becomes more salient. Dusk, as introduced in “Karintha,” is the time between day and night when the light is continuously fading and the dark is growing, yet the change is almost imperceptible, and “Reapers” develops this idea of slow constant movement by exposing its social implications while also allowing the darkness to take a firmer hold of the atmosphere, as both the reapers and the horses pulling the mowing machine are black. Again, word choice is important, and the power of darkness is an important element of the light/dark discursive binary operating in Cane. The fact that the author chooses to use and repeat the word “black” when so many other synonyms could have taken its place makes the word stand out bold, stark and deliberately placed. The word’s connotation is not that of beauty, rather it has an ominous and threatening feeling about it.

The poem “November Cotton Flower” immediately follows “Reapers,” and the reader is now faced with an entire piece devoted to the image that was used just three pages earlier to describe Karintha. There is undoubtedly a connection between the two, as the poem ends with the image of “Brown eyes that loved without a trace of fear, / Beauty so sudden for that time of year” (In 13-14). The brown eyes could easily belong to Karintha, as they are capable of love and beauty just as she was. The first twelve lines describe a sad, barren landscape: rusty-looking cotton stalks and a branch so frail it could not even fulfill the function of a rake on the dusty, drought-ridden soil (Toomer 6). The nature imagery is there, but it is failing. It is infused with death rather than life as this
time it is not dusk that approaches, but winter. The death motif is maintained, and just as Karintha blossomed out of the hazy twilight like a bright flash before dark, so does the cotton flower bloom in November. In the first sketch the emotional atmosphere was described at the level of one person; the audience was able to connect with and feel for Karintha. This poem picks up that emotion and projects it over the entire landscape, extending the subject of the swan song from one person to an entire place. The text deliberately doubles back on itself and becomes self-referential, revisiting the image of the November cotton flower in order to deepen and develop our understanding of Karintha, as well as to show how important and natural, inherent even, are these connections between the people and the land they come from. It is almost as if one spirit runs through both, and in Part One of *Cane* Toomer captures this relationship.

The fragmented pieces of *Cane* are not randomly or hastily thrown into place, and careful attention must be paid to the order in which Toomer chose to introduce his audience to the various characters, concepts, and thematic elements of his text. The text is fascinatingly unsettled since it presents a fragmented face but at the same time strives fervently for unity and wholeness in terms of theme and motif. Every piece in *Cane* speaks to the relationship between place, community, and identity in one way or another. Part One is unified through the dusky, natural imagery where Part Two presents the sterile, urban images of the North. Toomer’s text capitalizes on many qualities of upheaval, uncertainty, and tension to express symbolically the state in which the African American community living in rural towns like Sparta found itself on the eve of the Great Migration. The imagery used in Part One frequently reinforces these hostile circumstances. For instance, at one point Karintha is walking home, and “the smoke was
so heavy you tasted it in water” (Toomer 4), signifying that the environment is becoming uninhabitable, the air is palpably full of smoke that represents the acrid racism in the South; the smoke from the burning pine needles poisons the air just as violence and intolerance from white aggressors plagued the African American community. Smoke also rises out of the saw mill, which is one mechanical or modern element that foreshadows the themes of Part Two as it stands out against the rural landscape, poisoning, rather than nurturing, the atmosphere. In “November Cotton Flower,” the earth is described as sere and infertile (6), symbolically signifying the inability of the land to sustain the community any longer – spiritually and socially as well as literally. In many ways, the text suggests that the situation in the South is untenable for many African Americans.

The important aspects of Part One of Cane acknowledge the problems in the rural South and thus point the way toward Part Two, in which the characters’ identities were changing as they began to break ties with their homeland; as they prepared to uproot themselves, there begins to emerge an ambiguity, an openness, and an indeterminacy about the boundaries between environment and self. The defining boundaries of identity begin to dissolve, bringing some disorientation, but also allowing normal limits of thought and behavior to become partially suspended while the transition is made between the old context and the new.

The imagery and theme of “Face,” another poem from the first section of Cane, also reinforce the sense that African Americans living in the rural South are entering an epoch of transition. The poem is a mere 13 lines long; it describes parts of a disembodied visage: hair that is “silver-gray” and eyes that are a “mist of tears”; the muscles of the face are “cluster grapes of sorrow / purple in the evening sun / nearly ripe for worms” (In
The evening sun is featured in this poem, incorporating the ambient dusk imagery and pointedly associating it with an ending, in this case, the final ending of death that is alluded to by the phrase "ripe for worms." The gray hair and the tears of the subject give a tender pathos to the image. "Face" was originally part of a three-poem series called "Georgia Portraits" published in *Modern Review* in 1923 (Toomer 10), and under that title the function of the sketch becomes much more complex and relevant to the social and political commentaries embedded in the text of *Cane*. Toomer illustrates the old, tired face of Georgia in this poem. By not making the subject of his poem a specific character, Toomer creates a figure that is able to represent the zeitgeist in the community. In his article "Toomer’s Eternal South," William M. Ramsey calls Toomer’s language in *Cane* “oracular” (76). Ramsey derives this term from the text’s attempts to serve as an oracle, giving its subjects mythical qualities. This tendency is clearly at work in “Face,” as the subject symbolically speaks for the community.

The diction of the last phrase, “nearly ripe for worms” is significant to the text’s relationship with the culture from which it arises; it is another point of entry into the sociological subtext of the poem. The word “nearly” is an important modifier to the phrase, fitting well with the dusk imagery which indicates the approach of the darkness, rather than the nightfall itself. The word “nearly” expresses the sense of motion that goes along with the liminal state – something is swiftly approaching, but has not yet arrived, thus the poem happens in this brief pre-cataclysmic window. Next, the term “ripe” problematizes the intention of the poem while simultaneously reinforcing the larger portrait of the South that Toomer paints. The word “ripe” implies that its subject is mature and full-grown, sweet and healthy and ready to be enjoyed. Ripeness is extremely
ephemeral – like the dusk or twilight, not incidentally – and is succeeded by spoilage and decay. This ultimate death corresponds to the foreshadowing done by the word “nearly,” but adds to it the reminder that just before the end, there was something meaningful and nearly perfect about the state of the subject, something sad and beautiful, which recalls the tone of “Karintha.” The language Toomer uses throughout the first section of *Cane* suggests that the African American community found itself on the verge of a kind of death in the white-dominated rural Southern communities, which were stifling due to violence and racial intolerance; similarly, the swan song is the last gasp of beauty before a pending death. It would seem that the entire opening section of *Cane* captures and celebrates this transient beauty. Since “Face” captures this complexity in such a sympathetic way, the images have truth value to the narrator and thus gain capital in the linguistic economy of *Cane*.

Amid all the carefully-constructed poeticism going on in the text, there are also elements of fragmentation and disconnection that emerge to unsettle its meaning. The characteristics of Modernism play an important role in the text, as it was composed at the height of the High Modernist period between WWI and WWII; the Modernist nature of the narrative and its tendency to have form equate to function must be considered when discussing the ultimate purpose of the competing discourses and the liminality resulting out of this conflict, for some of the primary concerns of Modernism, coming to terms with a fragmented psyche and resisting resolution and unity, are the concerns Toomer expresses for the African American community in *Cane*. Indeed, Toomer was a Modernist author, strongly wielding elements of ambiguity, montage, and Imagism to shape his narrative, poetry, and drama.
The vignette “Becky,” provides an instance of Toomer using the tropes of Modernism to serve and enhance his message. In “Becky,” the sense of isolation that pervades so many Modernist texts is almost palpable, and Toomer focuses this isolation to represent a very specific and intensely painful aspect of social dynamics in the rural South. Though she bears and raises two sons, Becky is not honored as an Earth Mother figure, and the language used to describe her lacks the sensuality of Karintha’s characterization. Because her children are bi-racial, she is exiled rather than celebrated in either the white or black communities. Similar to “Karintha” and to the vignette “Carma” as well, the piece “Becky” contains one phrase repeated over and over again, giving it a quality that is both lyrical and haunting simultaneously: “The pines whisper to Jesus” (Toomer 7). The narrator’s discourse in these lines draws heavily on the union of nature (the pines) and spirituality (Jesus) as he alludes to the understood communion between the two. Cast out from both communities, Becky is given “a narrow strip of land between the railroad and the road” on which to live (7). The physical location of her home bears great symbolic significance as well, as she is pushed to the fringe of society and placed between the road, that is, the connection to the rural town, and the railroad, that is the conduit to the city, to elsewhere, to the beyond. Here in Part One, the rural imagery so dominates the narrator’s discourse that the railroad tracks are perceived as something on the fringe or outer edge of the town, decreasing the implied social importance, while the road into town is the central artery of information, and thus of power. Situated between these two paths Becky is absolutely trapped, having no agency to return to the town or to escape to somewhere else. She is the quintessential example of a liminal being.
Becky is a pitiful figure because she is static and exiled, trapped in a liminal state, stranded in the racial divide between two communities. Her position is not voluntary. She has been thrust out of both the black and white communities, and much of Becky's misery is rooted in her isolation. This detail may be meant to comment on the importance of communal unity, especially during times of crisis. As the African American community was transforming during the Great Migration, this portion of the text seems anxious to underscore the importance of belonging to a group. Membership in such a group, be it defined by geographical, racial, spiritual, or social lines, seems to provide a foundation for the identity; Becky lacks access to any such group, and thus loses much of her identity. At one point, the narrator speculates on whether Becky has become a ghost, even though smoke still curls up from her chimney (Toomer 8), indicating that in reality she is still alive. In one sense, she does not exist anymore, merely because she lacks a social group to provide a foundation and context for her identity.

The portrait of Becky invites consideration of the material versus the spiritual life, and the text itself almost seems to pray for Becky as it utters the same phrase over and over as it describes her sad situation. The phrase “O pines whisper to Jesus” announces the strong presence of a spiritual discourse into this vignette, and yet, as in all of Toomer's pieces, the spiritual is only one of a binary pair, as the discourse of the body or the physical is also present, vying for power. Except for the narrator and his whispered prayers, the way the other townspeople, black and white, relate to Becky is always through materialistic means. They want her moved out of town so that they do not have to see her or deal with her presence. They build her a house, but the man who donated the supplies “would have shot the man who told he gave the stuff” (7), and they provide food
for her, but it is thrown out of the train as they pass (7). Physically Becky is provided for, but spiritually she is starving because the one thing refused to her is the connection to the community that gives her an identity and a place.

Becky’s end is an apt and poetic expression appropriate to her social state. Her home, like her social situation, proves untenable in the long term. Her long-leaning chimney, which has been ominously tilting over the roof of her cabin like a cobblestone sword of Damocles, collapses just as a train of townspeople, including the narrator, passes by. The cabin falls in on her and, unable to escape or perhaps desirous of death, she is crushed under the rubble (8). Instead of trying to dig out her body and ostensibly give it a proper burial, another bystander, Barlo, throws his Bible on top of the pile and the crowd disperses (9). Symbolically, these actions indicate that the furtive, occasional ministrations from strangers Becky previously received were not enough to sustain her in life, nor are they enough to save her in death. Toomer illustrates the power of the spiritual component of the community’s identity and demonstrates the difference between the concepts of religion and spirituality as they appear in Cane. Barlo’s Bible proved impotent; it could not help Becky. Rather, a spiritual connection to the soul of the community and the land was what she needed. These things would have provided an emotional foundation to which she could have anchored herself and found support.

This spirituality, as its significance is expressed by the narrator’s discourse, is not only tied to the community and one’s identity within that body, but also to the heritage and the land. With the last female character Toomer sketches in Part One, the connection between identity, community, and land is strongly reinforced once again. Fern is one of the last sensual and dusky characters inhabiting the first part of Cane. Her presence
tempers the mood of the opening section of *Cane* in a way that is unique from many of the other pieces about the rural South. The reader cannot help but hold up for comparison all of the female characters Toomer introduces, his parade of Earth Mothers all exuding a wholesome, life-giving sensuality, especially in light of the way the text deliberately draws attention to the interconnected nature of its pieces. Though the women never engage in dialogue, their vignettes speak to each other; and Fern is given the last vignette in Part One. After her sketch, Part One concludes with the intense and upsetting climax of “Blood Burning Moon,” which features the last rural female voice.

Toomer’s characterization of Fern carries the same interwoven threads of sensuality and nature that Karintha’s portrait did. However, unlike Karintha, Fern is one of the most passive characters Toomer sketches, so passive, in fact, that as she sits on the railing of her porch leaning her head back on one of the support beams, she will tilt her head forward just a bit so that it is always at an odd and uncomfortable angle, rather than remove the offending nail whose point juts out through the wood (Toomer 17). The oracular nature that Ramsey describes is the most salient agent at work in her story. As Toomer describes her, Fern’s eyes rest “idly where the sun, molten and glorious, [pours] down between the fringe of the pines... or [gaze] at the gray cabin on the knoll... but like as not, they’d settle on some vague spot above the horizon” (17). If readers follows Fern’s gaze, they see for themselves the sunset that works on both a literal and allegorical level to bathe Fern and her community in the last fading rays of light before they are overcome by the darkness. This sunset echoes the one described in the earlier poem “Song of the Son,” demonstrating the thick application of the sunset motif that binds together many of the individual pieces in *Cane*. Fern’s posture is suggestive of both
tranquility and apathy, as well as uncertainty and resentment, tensions which the text deliberately leaves unresolved. Fern’s purpose seems to be not to comment on what she cannot change, but simply to witness its advent.

Fern’s situation reiterates the spiritual connection between the rural Southern land and the African American community. The cane stalks, the Dixie Pike, the folk songs, and the pine trees are all images the narrator surrounds her with (Toomer 16). Her eyes are noted in this vignette again and again, and eyes are frequently interpreted as windows to the soul. In a sense, the setting flows into her soul as she looks around her home every night, and everything she sees thus becomes a part of her. This vital connection between place and identity is further supported when the narrator tries to imagine Fern living elsewhere, and finds he cannot do so without altering her identity entirely. He tries to picture her sitting in a tenement window looking down on the indifferent throngs of Harlem (17), but in his vision this new, harsh setting transforms her into “a white man’s concubine” or renders her “out and out a prostitute” (18). In the narrator’s opinion, Fern cannot exist and remain intact if she is uprooted and replanted in the North; she, the mystical and spiritual being who carries her environment around in her eyes and in her soul, is not possible in Chicago or Washington, D.C. or New York. But in rural Georgia, because the surroundings nurture her identity and connect her to the sustaining heritage of the community, she has a place and even wields a notable amount of power over men, who idolize and fear her, yet continue to bring her their bodies (16), almost as sacrificial offerings.

The pines and the cabin that Fern observes are both elements of the rural discourse Toomer uses to describe the setting throughout the first section of Cane, so the
fact that they are the final images Fern sees before the sun sets suggests that Toomer is bringing a kind of closure to this environment and the discourse that brought it to the audience. In subsequent sections of the book, the pastoral language will be set against that of the urban, competing for its value in the linguistic economy the narrator constructs. Equally important is the way Fern turns her gaze to the horizon, as if she is looking for something more than the rural town can offer. Fern's final gaze is a very textured act, heavy with subtextual implications. Her searching eyes are, in one sense, an oracle emblematic of her community, demonstrating how it was ready to leave behind the darkened South and move to a new and hopefully brighter future. Fern is in one sense a capstone to Part One because it is through her gaze that the gaze of the narrator shifts outward to new environs rather than remaining stagnantly mired in self-reflection and self-pity.

The first section of Cane ends with the story “Blood Burning Moon,” which has already been much discussed in the academic community as it is the most widely anthologized of Cane’s excerpts. “Blood Burning Moon” follows up a series of pastoral vignettes and poems like “Karintha” and “Fern” that illustrate sad but beautiful aspects of the African American community’s experience in the rural South. Louisa, the female protagonist of “Blood Burning Moon,” in many ways fits into the same pattern of female characters that populate Part One. She has skin “the color of oak leaves on young trees in fall,” and when first introduced in the story, she “sang as she came over the crest of the hill” (Toomer 30). These details align Louisa with the natural and spiritual imagery operating in Part One, as does her inability to attain any significant kind of agency or power over the outcome of her story, which focuses on her relationship with two men,
one black and the other white. Louisa’s feelings for these two are complicated. The vignette of “Becky” previously alluded to the fact that sexual relations between white men and black women were not uncommon in the South, and Toomer returns to that truth in this final story. Perhaps “Becky” begins to point to some of the social problems created by tensions between the black and white communities, but does not face these conflicts full-on. Toomer uses Louisa’s story and the tragic fate of Tom Burwell at the hands of a mob to focus on the anger, violence, and injustice that accompanied the complex inter-racial relationships in the South.

As a coda to Part One, “Blood Burning Moon” paints a horrific portrait of the state of the convoluted racial and sexual dynamics between blacks and whites in the South during this time in history. “Blood Burning Moon” brings to a head tensions created when black women were the helpless victims of white men’s sexual pursuits. This story, full of terror and violence, shocks the audience out of any romanticized version of the South they may have acquired from the other pieces in the section and essentially closes the door on any potential for life in the South. “Blood Burning Moon” also introduces the pre-war cotton factory and depicts “factory town” as the area where the black community lives and works (Toomer 30). As Part One is otherwise dominated by rural imagery, this factory feels out of place. The groundwork for Part Two begins to emerge here, as modernization and the presence of the factory do not seem to be helping the African American community prosper. The frustration and anger of Tom Burwell also initially feel out of place compared to the other, more somber emotions of Part One, yet here the text shows an important side of the African American community’s identity that deliberately contrasts with the swan song. Nostalgia, the text seems to say, is not helpful
in that it only serves to sentimentalize and idealize a past that contains its fair share of horror as well.

By concluding this section of the text with such a gruesome reminder of the abhorrent social conditions in the South as “Blood Burning Moon,” Toomer destabilizes the characterization of the place that has been the backdrop, and in a way the subject, of the entirety of Part One. Though this region does possess the qualities of spirituality and pastoral beauty, it is also an environment that breeds intolerance, violence, and murder. Similarly, though the North will be depicted as a spiritual wasteland full of technology and materialism, the text does not allow the characterization of this place to be entirely one-sided either; instead, the urban centers of the North invited promise for a better future and more possibilities, bought at the cost of a jarring transformation for the community’s identity. The way the narrative voice presents both the North and South as dichotomous environments rather than simple binary opposites, one all “good” and the other all “bad,” is yet another way the text creates liminality for its themes to dwell in rather than settling firmly on one simple version of its subjects.

At this point it will be useful to consider the significance of the first part of Cane in the context of the moment of history from which it arose. During the early 20th century, the rural South was seething with hostility toward the African American community. Though slavery had been abolished for over fifty years, Jim Crow laws and the presence of the Ku Klux Klan threatened the safety and peace of mind of many, if not all, African Americans living in the South. Southern blacks began looking to Northern urban centers like Chicago, New York City, and Washington, D.C. as places where they could be freed from the noxious social situations choking the South. In the article
“Individualism and Community in Black History and Fiction,” Donald B. Gibson articulates the situation for many blacks in the rural south: “All were forced north by terror and violence or by some form of racist practice. All were torn from a life which, though difficult, was relatively simple and supportive in ways in which the fragmented communal situation of the North was not” (124).

The text was created during the peak of this social phenomenon and is able to capture with the intensity of poetic language the complex and conflicted emotional and psychological situation experienced by the black community. The South was a sort of cradle to African American culture, as sordid and despicable as the origin of the blacks’ introduction to America may have been. In the article “Primitivism and Intellect in Toomer’s *Cane* and McKay’s *Banana Bottom*: The Need for an Integrated Black Consciousness,” Kay Van Mol argues that Toomer’s text links a connection to the land with African heritage (49). It would seem that the environment of the South exerted a strong influence on the development of the identity of the African American community, and this is expressed in *Cane* through the frequent connections between landscape and character. Complementary to Van Mol’s point and indicative of the connotation of spirituality I use in my argument, Gibson points out that not only did almost all of the African Americans living in the South feel a strong connection to the land, but to each other as well. He asserts, “The sense of community originating in Africa and adapted to the conditions of slavery in the new world persisted in the postbellum South” (124). The relocation of the African American community away from its home in the South destabilized several aspects of the community’s identity, one of the most vital being its
spiritual connection to the land and the past. The consequences of this spiritual, social, and geographical disruption are the subject of the subsequent section.
CHAPTER THREE – The Modern Desert: A Portrait of Washington D.C.

Leaving the Sempter to continue its journey of violence and beauty through the dusk and into the night, the second part of Cane takes place almost entirely in Washington, D.C. The urban social center creates a sharp contrast with the rural South. Toomer himself, after returning from Sparta and reflecting on the effect the Great Migration was having on the values of the old African American home land, observed that “The folk-spirit was walking in to die on the modern desert” (Toomer 142). The nuance of Toomer’s characterization of this new landscape in Cane suggests that it ultimately fails as a satisfactory replacement for the spiritual fecundity the African American community left behind in the rural South. While the narrator’s language in the first part of the text predominantly valued the discourses of the spiritual and the rural, the second part operates more in the language of the materialistic and the urban. This transition makes sense, since these discourses suit the content of Part Two. However, the economy of the text and the narrator’s value system does not necessarily award the same degree of value to these discourses. More so than in Part One, in Part Two the narrator spends time describing situations that are tense and threatening or disruptive and disappointing, rather than satisfying and wholesome for the African American community. In his analysis, Dow mentions that in Part Two of Cane the narrator’s multipersonal nature becomes more noticeable, reflecting the fragmentation and shattered quality of these urban environments (73). The narrative voices, Dow asserts, “while more imperious and aggressive than in Part One, become disparate and diffuse” (73).

Along with a marked shift in tone, in Part Two, we also begin to see more distinctly how the discourses of Cane operate in binary pairs. The urban and the rural are
both present in the text and compete for power, as do the material and the spiritual. In this way, the text creates and reinforces the overarching sense of liminality, with the locus of power always dwelling somewhere between the two competing discourses instead of settling on one side of the binary or the other, just as the African American community was suspended between seemingly dissolving boundaries, moving from a disappearing homeland to an uncertain future. The previous section of this thesis explored how positive value was given to the rural and the spiritual ideologies; in this section I will explore how the text uses language and imagery to create a negative portrayal of the urban and materialistic. Also, it should be noted that just as I used the term spiritual to describe the community's emotional ties to the land and its heritage, the ideology of materialism as I use it in this argument places value on superficial, commercial, and physical qualities. Materialism represents an emotional sterility and an absence of all the characteristics that defined spirituality.

Another binary that cannot be ignored is the prevailing black/white tension, already evident in Part One. The concept of race is a complicated subject, and the text's representation of it resists resolution into one clear statement about the racial aspect of identity. The sense of liminality created by this binary in particular is an important element of the text's thematic purpose. The way Toomer constructs the racial component of his characters and settings is one of the least stable aspects of the book, and this makes it a very rich access point for subtextual exploration. He seems to represent race as a fluid concept rather than endorsing a simple and static black/white duality. The different character sketches, vignettes, and poems of Part Two manifest this instability in a variety
of ways, always, however, connecting it back to the lack of satisfaction the black community finds in the urban areas after leaving the rural South.

The first vignette in the second section of *Cane* is “Seventh Street.” The piece consists of one paragraph that is preceded and followed by a four-line song. Even before looking at the content of this section, the structure invites comment and analysis. Although its language, rhythm, and form contrast with the opening piece of Part One, “Karintha,” in other ways “Seventh Street” is strikingly similar to “Karintha” as well. In this obvious analogy, the text forces the reader to look for parallels between Part One and Part Two. “Karintha” and “Seventh Street” are the heralds of their respective sections, and their nearly identical structure heightens the juxtaposition of the content of each. In the article “Going Urban: American Folk Art and the Great Migration,” Lynda Roscoe Hartigan comments that the 1920s was the era when “the nation began struggling with the pros and cons of the city – increasingly associated with the bigger and faster, as well as the modern and impersonal” (27). This struggle is elucidated in the second section of *Cane*. The conflicts that Hartigan mentions provide a backdrop for the dynamic shift in self-concept that the African American community experienced after leaving the South, introducing yet another layer of complexity onto the task of finding their place within the greater American identity, which was malleable during the Great Migration as Southern blacks tried to find their place in the North.

The lines of verse set at the beginning and ending of “Seventh Street” introduce its primary purpose by featuring an urban discourse that highlights a sharp juxtaposition with the characters and setting of rural Georgia. This new discourse creates a contrast that has many dimensions, one of the most noticeable being its speed, which immediately
links in to the tropes of Modernism. The verse opens with the line, “Money burns the pocket, pocket hurts” and ends with the image of “zooming Cadillacs, / Whizzing, whizzing down the street-car tracks” (Toomer 41). The dynamic motion with which the phrases connect and almost seem to run over each other points to the way that the pace of life was one of the most dramatic differences between rural and urban communities and the discourses that describe them. The shift in language is jarring to the reader, creating a discomfort meant to recreate the dismay many African Americans must have felt upon first arriving in the cities. Not only do the words “zooming” and “whizzing” appear early in the second section of *Cane*, but the text itself also embodies a faster pace in its very syntax, thus working at both the structural and linguistic levels to make meaning.

The materialistic and monetary images introduced in these pithy first lines of the second section are significant as well: “Money burns the pocket, pocket hurts” (Toomer 41). Money was rarely mentioned directly in the first part of *Cane*, yet it is the first word to meet the reader’s eye after the setting shifts to the city with “Seventh Street.” The word “money” is immediately connected to the painful sensation of burning, which was most recently associated with the fiery lynching scene at the end of “Blood Burning Moon.” The text demonstrates how the dangers in the North, though present, are much less violent and thus not as terrible as dangers in the South. In the North, materialism is presented as a dominant and problematic aspect of urban life that African Americans had to learn to cope with. Money is also tied to the abstraction of value that happens more and more in Part Two, as the coins and bills are just arbitrary symbols for assigned amounts, rather than carrying any independent meaning. Though cities are generally associated with wealth and prosperity, the text points out the negative consequences of unbound
consumerism and exploitation on the newly transplanted African American community, thus taking value away from the urban discourse rather than adding to it. This dualism of the simultaneous presence of wealth and poverty is one source of tension in the second part of *Cane*, as the expectations of urban wealth and success come into conflict with disappointing reality.

Another kind of pain is expressed in this piece through the sharp ‘z’ sounds repeated in the words “zooming” and “whizzing,” along with their aforementioned speed. All of these images combine to create a chaotic and unpleasantly intense first impression of the city that is decidedly unwelcoming and impossible to settle into. While the atmosphere of the first part of *Cane* was steeped in dusky haze, the second section is dominated by feelings of discomfort and, consequently, dissatisfaction. The liminal state created in the first section is sustained in the second section as the community is unable to comfortably inhabit its new milieu. Instead, a tension builds between characters and their surroundings, as when the artificial constructs of “street-car tracks” seem to bite into the soft flesh of the inhabitants. There is no harmony between the people and their metropolitan environment.

However, the continuation of the liminal state allows the text to express and explore different aspects of the community’s identity, since liminality allows barriers and boundaries to shift and dissolve. The connection between the African American community and the rural land where nature was immediately accessible was only expressed latently in the language of the first section, as when the protagonists were characterized using nature imagery: Karintha is perfect as dusk (3), the curves of Fern’s profile are like “mobile rivers” (16), and the pines whisper to Jesus out of pity for Becky.
Part Two of *Cane* brings the need for that connection to the forefront, mainly by noting and bemoaning the absence of this connection in the northern cities. Toomer’s use of the negative here is important – the text invites the audience to notice what is not there, and then gives significance to that absence. This technique is repeated in Toomer’s treatment of light and dark, so it is helpful to notice when and how he also uses it here to draw the reader’s attention to the importance of nature by describing a completely sterile, urban environment. The first evidence of this shift in attention toward the importance of nature happens as the reader is invited to contrast elements of “Karintha” with “Seventh Street.”

Whereas “Karintha” was an emotionally intense character sketch, “Seventh Street” is a descriptive paragraph offering a snapshot of downtown Washington, D.C. The street itself becomes the character being described, as the text moves into a mode of expressionism. Seventh Street is “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” (Toomer 41). Seventh Street is a sort of boundary line, and in that capacity it also becomes a site of unexpected combinations. This kind of characterization binds the people and the community to each other – Seventh Street described by Toomer is not only the physical pavement or the people who occupy it, but is also the union and the contrast of the two. Significantly, this union is marked by “black reddish blood” meeting “whitewashed wood,” suggesting that the union is not peaceful and happy (41). The emphasis on street images contrasts with the images of rural Georgia in the first section, suggesting that in the urban centers, humanity is lost or at least diluted, and, precipitating this loss, African
Americans in the cities are devalued by whites. The text’s focus shifts from describing people to describing places, and the transition, again, as with the abrupt shift in pace, is jarring. This is meant to mirror the difficult transition many African Americans felt when leaving the South and arriving in the Northern cities. The text creates this discomfort intentionally to mirror the feelings of a community trying to settle into a new place and finding the transition difficult.

The contrast between the phrases “crude-boned” and “soft-skinned” evokes a feeling of potential violence and pain, as if the black community coming up from the south is this soft-bodied entity that is about to injure itself on the hard edges of the city, and a “wedge” of people “thrust” into the city furthers the sensations of pain and violence. All of this language is clearly participating in the discourse of the physical or material, where the body and its sensations are the primary focus, though the pleasant sensuality attached to the imagery present in Part One is noticeably absent in Part Two; in Part One, the physicality is fused with a spiritual connection between the soul and the earth. Much of that spiritual connection is lost during the move from country to city. The “unconscious rhythms” are suggestive of breathing or a heartbeat, as if the street itself is one living entity, yet an entity that lacks a soul. The rest of the paragraph that is “Seventh Street” consists of a montage of sentence fragments, questions, and exclamations. There is emotion, but it is so frenetic and disorderly, delivered so rapidly and without context, that it quickly becomes nearly meaningless. The language of the text itself seems to be resisting its new subject, refusing to settle into a coherent pattern and to make sense neatly.
The second piece of this section of *Cane*, "Rhobert," reiterates and develops the negative aspects of wealth and commerce introduced in "Seventh Street.” Again, the discourse used in this piece relies heavily on images of materialism, rather than spirituality, to express its point. Yet since the portrait being drawn is that of an unhappy man, the value and thus the power of this discourse is placed closer to the spiritual than the physical end of the continuum that has each of these binaries at its poles. Rhobert, as the narrator describes him, “wears a house, like a monstrous diver’s helmet, on his head” (Toomer 42). This house-as-diver’s helmet metaphor controls the entire character sketch, and it develops the concept of barriers that was introduced in “Seventh Street,” as well as furthers the sense of discomfort felt by members of the black community in their newly settled urban environments. Rhobert’s house is a multifaceted metaphor for the condition of many African American families who were trying to adapt to their new neighborhoods in the cities after the Great Migration. The house displays a complex duality by being both a form of protection and an inhibiting barrier between Rhobert and his neighbors. Gibson describes how “the result of not having a place, a firmly established, positive social identity in the North, was, and is, tension” (124), and he goes on to explain how this tension fostered a lack of access to the larger community, creating just the kind of barrier that Toomer makes literal and surreal with Rhobert’s helmet. Typically, a diver’s helmet provides protection from an inhospitable environment by providing air to keep its user alive, but in Rhobert’s case the house, though worn like a diver’s helmet, generates tension as it not only separates him from the community, but also “is a dead thing that weights him down” (Toomer 42). Toomer emphasizes the fact that the helmet, though life-sustaining, is a heavy and cumbersome load for the diver to bear, yet one that he must
bear in order to survive. This relationship describes the general message the text sends about the black community in their new urban setting: it is a weight they must bear because it will possibly keep their culture alive, a chance the rural South did not offer.

However, the text returns to its oracular nature as the narrator of “Rhobert” intones, “Life is water that is being drawn off” (Toomer 42). This phrase is presented in lyrical form that interrupts the character sketch, much like Karintha’s description was punctuated with lines from a Southern spiritual. This time, the song seems to interject some hope into Rhobert’s situation by predicting that there will be a time in the future when the ‘water’ or the hostile environment outside of the helmet – presumably the discomfort the black community feels in the city due to racial and economical tension – will be depleted enough that the helmet can be removed and the barrier can come down. This perspective is particularly important in light of Toomer’s belief that race was fluid and should not be a defining characteristic of one’s identity. This opinion is an answer he offers to the problem of racial divisions and the issue of where the African American identity fits within the larger American one.

This offer of hope in the middle of “Rhobert” is interesting because it seems to be introduced simply as an excuse to be dismissed as trite and to reiterate Rhobert’s apathy. The text goes on, “How long before the water will be drawn off? Rhobert does not care. Like most men who wear monstrous helmets, the pressure it exerts is enough to convince him of its practical infinity” (42). Here a fairly transparent connection between the social situation of blacks in the Northern, urban communities and Rhobert can be made. Rhobert is the symbol of the kind of social and economic death that was forced upon many African Americans coming North as they attempted to own and maintain houses.
Once they reach the city, the poverty of the people becomes a much more salient feature in describing their social situation. Rhobert demonstrates a kind of spiritual death caused by striving for middle class material comfort, and judging by his condition, the text suggests that this is not the only kind of satisfaction and fulfillment that the African American community needs to be healthy, though such materialism is what the values of the Northern urban communities attempt to foist upon it. The lyrics of the African American spiritual “Deep River” are sung to Rhobert as he “goes down” at the end of the sketch. This stylistic device is similar to that used in Karintha’s vignette and “Blood Burning Moon,” both of which open and close with song lyrics. Cane’s narrator turns to song when the emotional intensity of his content grows unbearable. The music is an audible, and thus more tangible, element of the community’s spirituality. In this situation the community seems to sing for Rhobert because they can do nothing else to save him; he is lost (Dow 74).

The “Rhobert” sketch is one of the most blatantly critical of the condition of blacks in their new homes after relocating during the Great Migration. The discourse the narrator uses to describe this urban milieu creates a world that is hostile, materialistic, and completely devoid of the spiritual richness once found (though no longer available) through connections to land and ancestry in the rural South. Rhobert is an apt example of this spiritual poverty found in the cities when the text notes that, “The dead house is stuffed. The stuffing is alive” (42). The live stuffing is Rhobert, and Rhobert in turn stands for any newly transplanted African American trying to live in the North by the standards of his new community and failing to find emotional or spiritual satisfaction in doing so. In his article, “Jean Toomer, Technology, and Race,” Mark Whalan points out
that in the second section of *Cane*, Toomer approaches “a recognition of the socially constructed nature of what constitutes materiality, and...the specific form of materiality to be transformed here is race” (466). Rhobert is clearly a victim of the materialism that Whalan talks about, and the difficulty Rhobert faces stems from his inability to negotiate the de-facto caste system constructed by the white upper class that controls the power in the cities. Rhobert’s problem reveals the similarities and differences between the social structures in the rural South and urban North and isolates one of the many factors that made the African American community’s transition from the former to the latter so difficult.

In addition to Rhobert’s diver’s helmet, other images of physical and spiritual barriers emerge throughout Part Two of *Cane*. For instance, in the short story “Box Seat,” the protagonist, Dan Moore, perceives the house where he goes to visit a girl, Muriel, as possessing mechanical qualities that affect its occupants as well, thus the house is rendered restrictive to the human connections Dan strives to forge within its walls. Upon entering the house, Dan notes that “there is a sharp click as [Mrs. Pribby, the house mother] fits into her chair...the click is metallic like the sound of a bolt being shot into place” (Toomer 60). This description emphasizes the way the landlady is a mechanical piece of her home rather than a live person; she is wary of Dan, and fails to bond or sympathize with him throughout the story. Dan goes on to describe how “the house contracts about him. It is a sharp-edged, massed, metallic house...bolted to the endless row of metal houses” and also “bolted about Mrs. Pribby” (60). The description of the house emphasizes how constrained and emotionally stunted the characters are within this environment, and also how easily they lose their humanity and become a part of the
The physical discomfort and restraint Dan describes in Mrs. Pribby's characterization suggest spiritual restriction as well. The language of this passage relies heavily on a mechanized, modernized vocabulary. When characters and their homes are described in such terms, they seem to be devoid of spirituality and unable to connect with each other on a human level. Instead, they are hollow cogs turning, but not feeling, in the industrial wasteland of the North.

The value system embedded in Dan's observations reinforces the ideologies supported and condemned by the discourses of the narrator in Part One; the urban and materialistic are portrayed as negative because of their lack of spirituality and their tendency to create barriers between people. Furthermore, later in "Box Seat," imagery of nature is presented and Dan's response is wholeheartedly positive. As he makes his way to his seat in the theater, Dan squeezes past a "portly Negress" who gives off a "soil-soaked fragrance" (Toomer 65). Immediately, this sensory stimulation triggers a deluge of other images in Dan's mind: "Through the cement floor, [the Negress'] strong roots sink down. They spread under the asphalt streets...Her strong roots sink down and spread under the river and disappear in the blood-lines that waver south" (65). These images offer a sense of heritage and connectedness; the "roots" Dan imagines are the connections to his past as well as the conduits that join this woman with the earth. The spirituality portrayed in this scene strongly links the concepts of the natural world with the African American ancestry in the South. Again, here spirituality is clearly not a religious inclination but a unity with the land, the past, and others in the community. The images Dan feels when he makes contact with this stranger in the theater harbor the spirituality
that Mrs. Pribby’s house sorely lacks, and the discursive value systems continue to compete for power.

The tension between the narrator’s various discourses and their respective values within the linguistic economy of the text develops further in the vignette “Calling Jesus,” in which an unnamed female protagonist’s soul is described “like a little thrust-tailed dog that follows her” through the city all day but is shut out of her home at night (Toomer 58). The imagery of barriers appears again; this time, a troubling rift between physical and spiritual parts of the identity comprise the sketch’s subject matter. Kerman and Eldridge’s biography of Toomer reports that when he undertook the composition of *Cane*, life experiences had already left the author aware of the alienation of “soul from soil and soul from soul,” and especially concerned about the peculiar alienation arising from racial difference in society he had observed while living in the North and then visiting the South (79). This anxiety over the isolation of the soul and a lack of unity within the community is evident throughout the text, probably because Toomer not only observed them, but also felt deeply affected by them on a personal level. Not surprisingly, discourses valuing spirituality and a connection to rural roots seem to appear in tandem frequently in *Cane*.

Twice in “Calling Jesus,” in the first and last paragraphs, the narrator calls out “eoho Jesus” as if he wants to call back the spiritual strength that the protagonist seems to be in the very process of losing; whether this choice to abandon her spirituality is conscious or unconscious is left ambiguous. The phrase could also be a salutation to the approaching figure, who the narrator recognizes but the girl would not, if she were awake. The narrator intones “eoho Jesus” while the protagonist sleeps, and a figure only
referred to as "some one" yet understood to be Jesus, quietly enters, wraps the dog so that it will not shiver, and lays it by the sleeping girl. This silent presence is described using language that belongs to the rural discourse, as it approaches "quiet as a cotton boll" and brushes against the "milk-pod cheek of Christ" as it picks up the dog. The girl is also described as sleeping "cradled in dream-fluted cane" (58). The language of the rural is tied into all of these images and always is associated with a comforting, peace-bringing source and the return of spirituality. In the girl's dream she is literally returning to the rural South; her soul is reunited with the soil and the cane fields that represent spiritual wholeness and the community's homeland. When Jesus comes and is greeted directly by the narrator, He comes enfolded in rural imagery. In this way, the text favors or values the discourse of the rural, implementing it as a healing balm on the woman whose connection with her spirit, the "thrust-tailed dog," has been damaged by her life in the city. The discourses of the rural and the spiritual work concurrently to express strongly the connection between a rural environment and spiritual fecundity; the connection to the country could heal the girl's enervated spiritual state, if only she would acknowledge it and invite it in.

The liminality in this vignette is created as the narrator negotiates the space between the girl's physical and spiritual life, the former belonging to the city and the latter to the country. She occupies the space in between these two, and in doing so her identity has become fragmented. In his essay "Jean Toomer's Cane," Robert Bone points out that many of Toomer's characters are vacillating constantly between two identities (182). Bone's observation dovetails with my argument; I contend that this vacillation occurs when characters struggle to manage identities that exist between the rural and the
urban settings, partially grounded in both but settled in neither. There is also a spiritual component to the identity that is affected by this liminality. The discourse in Part Two illuminates the way the urban setting is spiritually inhibitive to the identity; in this sense Part Two is a clear counterpoint to Part One. Bone asserts that the text shows how man's essential goodness has been crushed and buried by modern industrial society, which aligns with my reading of "Rhobert," and Bone goes on to argue that this condition consequently limits man's growth and acts as a barrier to his soul (182). This, Bone contends, is represented in *Cane* through a series of burial and confinement symbols.

Where Rhobert's house can be read as one of the burial symbols Bone describes and Mrs. Pribby's house may be another, the vestibule in which the little dog sleeps is indicative of the sense of spiritual confinement Toomer saw happening to the African American identity in the cities. The text states and then reiterates how the dog is "left in the vestibule, nosing the crack beneath the big storm door" every night, even though it follows the girl around all day long. The only time this barrier between physical and spiritual comes down and the soul (the dog) is reunited with the body (its master) is at night when the woman sleeps and returns to her spiritual homeland – the South – in her dreams. Another intriguing aspect of the allegory operating in this vignette is the way the soul is subjugated to the status of a pet while the embodiment of the master is a human; the roles of God and man seem to be reversed. The language would at first suggest that the physical, the body, is meant to be valued over the spiritual. However, the way the emotional topography of the sketch lies, the reader feels more sympathy for the soul that has been forgotten while the body is portrayed as blind, numb, and desensitized; the
narrator values the well-being of the soul over the body, but society's vagaries in the urban North do not reinforce this stance.

So the power balance established by the discourses in Part One is maintained after all, though the way this balance is portrayed has been inverted in Part Two, focusing on the negative instead of the positive. The spiritual is still valued over the physical, just as the rural is still valued over the urban. Though this relationship does not change from Part One, it is complicated in Part Two by the introduction and exploration of those things that would inhibit the identity's connection to its spiritual and rural values: the ideology of the urban, which brings with it physical temptation and distraction. Part Two accomplishes the important task of presenting and describing a barrier between body and soul that is constructed as a consequence of the African American community moving to the Northern cities. The Modern concept of a fragmented identity emerges strongly in Part Two, partly caused by this intangible barrier erected between body and soul. Toward the end of this section, the text begins to explore ways to heal this schism and reconnect the two parts of the self.

The poem "Beehive" moves away from economic problems the black community faced in the cities to explore two other factors that affected participants in the Great Migration: the emotional stressors and psychological pressures that were negative consequences of living in the northern cities. Like "Reapers" and "Face," it is short and its language is simple, yet it is charged with intricate nuances. It begins, "Within this black hive to-night / There swarm a million bees" (Toomer 50). The poem begins by describing the heart of the hive so that there is no distance between reader and subject. This technique mimics the claustrophobia-inducing conditions in many urban
neighborhoods where black families moving up from the rural South would have lived. The poem goes past the point of simply describing the crowded conditions in the cities and allows the reader to experience literally this sensation.

The color of the hive is significant as well. Toomer is careful to point out that it is a “black hive,” and the reader is left to decide whether this darkness is due to the night time or the race of the hive’s inhabitants. Imagery of dark and light has been operating throughout the text, yet the connotations associated with each shift and change. Throughout the entire text of Cane, Toomer plays with the connotations and implications of darkness. He complicates and problematizes the audience’s experience with color and darkness in order to destabilize any preconceived assumptions his readers may be bringing to his text. Toomer first manages to deconstruct the function of darkness and blackness in his text, and then he redefines it using his own terms, which correspond to his proposed solution to the problem of race and identity. This solution rejects traditional definitions of white and black in favor of flexible racial boundaries that are less constrictive. Toomer invites the reader to become open to larger or more complex definitions of race rather than being limited to tight, oppositional binaries. “Beehive” furthers Toomer’s goal by offering a very specific and concrete example of the way the reader should not be able to pin down the source of the darkness in the hive.

The poem goes on to describe bees flying from the hive to the moon and back, and then it continues, “Silver honey dripping from the swarm of bees / Earth is a waxen cell of the world comb / And I, a drone” (Toomer 50). At this point in the poem, the bees become the source of what is sweet and good about the hive, the honey, symbolically saying that the black people are the source of any richness that is coming out of their
communities, while the Earth is described as a “waxen cell.” With this comparison, Toomer seems to assign to the urban environment a barren sterility; the present discourse offers a distinct counterpoint to the language of Part One, which describes the rural setting with such spiritual richness. Each piece in the second part of *Cane* develops the characterization of the Northern cities further; in “Seventh Street” they are hostile and chaotic, and in “Rhobert” they are materialistic and oppressive, in “Calling Jesus” they are spiritually inhibitive, but in “Beehive” the crux of their flaw is revealed: it is their complete lack of any connection to nature that makes it impossible for the black community to lay down roots there and establish a safe, stable community.

This interpretation is reinforced by the last line of the poem. The speaker wishes that he “might fly out past the moon / And curl forever in some far-off farmyard flower” (Toomer 50). The nostalgia is palpable. The speaker longs to return to the rural environment where he can be united once again with growing things, the most essential part of his former life that he has been unable to replace in the city. The land the narrator dreams of is very similar to the place where the protagonist of “Calling Jesus” goes when she sleeps; again the strong presence of persistent motifs in *Cane* adds depth to each piece’s individual meaning. The liminal state of the community’s identity manifests itself in this poem as the speaker is clearly not content where he is. Instead, he needs to keep moving, to “fly out past” the city, until he can land in a place where he can be more connected to the Earth not as a waxen cell, but as a loamy field. The speaker seems to be aware that he cannot return to the rural South, presumably the location of this “far-off farmyard flower,” because he says he will fly “out past the moon” to get there, giving his destination a more mythical, whimsical aura. Returning to the South is no longer an
attractive option, as the text of the first part reveals, but the cities in the North do not nurture his spiritual needs, so he dreams of an unearthly place where he will be able to revisit the version of the South that is lost to him now and will finally be able to leave the liminal state of transition. Ramsey describes this moment as the poet’s attempt to fuse the past, present, and future in an oracular vision and stand on Southern soil while simultaneously meditating above the burden of time and history (77). In doing so, the speaker is perpetually trapped in the liminal state, homeless and unsatisfied. In his lament, the speaker of “Beehive” becomes the mouthpiece for the transplanted African American community.

After “Beehive,” whose content is so directly related to the urban environment that is the subject of Part Two, the poem “Harvest Song” seems to be curiously situated. The content of this poem is entirely focused on the rural rather than dealing with the city setting like the rest of the pieces in the section. In a letter to Waldo Frank written on December 12, 1922, Toomer states that from the point of view of the “spiritual entity” of the work, which has experienced an awakening and traveled through various stages of self-discovery and exploration, “Harvest Song” is the end of the journey (Toomer 152); it is also, not insignificantly, the last poem in Part Two and also the last poem in the book. After the spiritual paucity depicted in the previous piece of Part Two, “Harvest Song” reads like a biblical text, with long bulky lines that build into verse paragraphs. The language in this poem is also significant, as it returns to images that clearly belong to Part One, almost with a longing backward glance: oats, grain, fields, dust, hills, scythes, wheat, corn, songs, reapers, and, perhaps most significantly, “dusk,” and “sweet-stalked cane” (71). If Part One was a swan song for a time and place that were dying, perhaps
“Harvest Song” is the final gasp of the African American spirit trying to sustain itself in the rural South after the community, and thus the focus of the narrator and the text has shifted to the cities. The poem symbolically speaks to the decline of African American culture, given that the only crop that is not harvested is the cane, the only source of “sweetness” in the litany of other plants that were all taken in. Here the sugar cane is the totem for the African American community in the rural South. The oats, wheat, and corn are all represented as unappetizing as they have no taste and crack between the speaker’s teeth. This is the first time rural imagery has been described in such a negative way, and the sense of hopelessness and death looming over the rural South intensifies due to this shift in tone.

Karen Jackson Ford offers one reading of “Harvest Song,” claiming that of all the pieces in Cane, a book meant to serve as a swan song for a time, place, and way of life, this poem performs the most elegiac function (115). The poem draws upon the language of dusk that dominated Part One, not only describing a moment that is the end of day, but also the end of a season. The speaker leads off the poem by declaring himself a “reaper,” rather than a farmer or sharecropper. This careful choice of words makes him an easy allegorical stand-in for the Grim Reaper, carrying his scythe and presiding over the moment of death, again, not only of the day, but the death of the community and the agrarian way of life. Ford also points out the complexity Toomer embeds into the phrase “All my oats are cradled,” the second statement murmured by the speaker. While the speaker literally means his oats are cut down, the word “cradled” also carries a more positive connotation of nestling or protecting, as one would a baby. Since it is the Grim Reaper making this statement, images of life and death are combined in the one word,
hinting that the death of the past will entail the death of the present and future as well (115). Ford’s reading clearly depicts the concept of liminality, as the interpretation of the word “cradle” hovers between two meanings rather than settling on one. The discourses of the rural and the spiritual are both touched by death as the Great Migration rips the African American community away from its homeland. The reader has the sensation that this poem is an important crossroads in the thematic progress of the text. Down one path lies the rural South – tradition, community, spirituality – all unified yet all trapped in the past. And down the other path is the future – the urban, mechanical, soulless void of the city. The feeling of suspension remains since neither path is a viable option, and instead the speaker of “Harvest Song” lingers over his message, his last chance to occupy the space of his ancestors. The language of the poem becomes repetitive, as if the speaker has nothing left to say but does not want to cede the microphone.

The speaker’s position is also interesting in that he repeatedly refers to his “dry throat,” indicating that he cannot produce a saving song. He tries to call “eoho” to summon and connect with his brothers in community, but his voice does not work and only silence is produced. The spiritual connection is gone from the community; there is no unity. To further express this spiritual paucity, the speaker repeats over and over again that he is hungry. Here the discourses of physical and spiritual overlap, doubling the intensity and for once cooperating to make meaning rather than competing for power. In the last lines of the poem, the speaker states, “My pain is sweet. Sweeter than the oats or wheat or corn. It will not bring me knowledge of my hunger” (In 16). The only crop the speaker has previously referred to as “sweet” is the “sweet-stalked cane,” cane being the plant most symbolic to the text. This sweetness is the only positive quality expressed in
the whole poem, and it characterizes both pain and the cane that is the totem of the African American community.

The duality of this association, pain and sweetness, expresses an important aspect of the status of the black community as its identity transforms during the Great Migration: the community suffers, yet there is sweetness in this pain implying that the value or result of this pain will go on to produce a greater good. Other elements of duality reverberate through the whole section, for instance the discomfort of the urban centers is coupled with the promise and opportunities they offer. There is a potential for change in these urban city centers that did not exist in the dying agrarian culture of the rural South, especially as they clearly demand that the community continue to evolve and redefine its identity in order to settle into this new place. The depiction of this grim situation tinged with hope is the inverse of Part One, which painted a picture of the rural South that was pastoral and romantic yet stained with violence and racism. Always, the binary is not allowed to resolve entirely as each pole is not purely good or bad; both urban North and rural South are represented in their complexity rather than boiled down to oversimplified clichés. In remaining loyal to this more complicated but truer characterization of each place, the sense of liminality dwelling within the text is intensified.

The last lines of “Harvest Song,” quoted earlier, clearly state that the pain felt by the speaker from the rural South will not bring knowledge. The biblical language implies a situation reminiscent of Eden when sweet fruit brought knowledge and sin. The fact that the speaker gets to taste the sweetness of pain and remain innocent of knowledge suggests that this experience may bring to the African American community redemption rather than a fall from grace. Though the rural imagery and the discourse that describes it
begin to take on negative value through the connotation of death they carry, as if night has finally come to the community that has been living in the dusk for so long, the strength of the spiritual language buoys up the larger message of this poem. It may be an elegy as Ford suggests, but it ends with the hope of renewal and redemption in death.
CHAPTER FOUR – Yearning for Soil-Soaked Redemption: A Portrait of Kabnis’ Strife

Ralph Kabnis is a creature born out of the liminality created in the wake of the Great Migration. In this character, Toomer produces a manifestation of the manner in which the African American community suffered as it was challenged to redefine its identity. Dow posits that, from a certain perspective, Kabnis may also represent the narrator of the first two sections who tries to become integrated into the community and must humble himself and suffer humility in his attempt to do so (82). Part Three of the text, which is comprised only of the dramatic novella “Kabnis,” is structured around a tension generated by the protagonist’s inability to reconcile the disparate parts of his own identity. The crisis in the plot emerges because the protagonist has internalized the spiritual sterility and emotional barriers of the North where he was raised, yet he wants to belong to the rural South where he feels his roots are. This internal conflict is expressed through many of the competing discourses, which were introduced in the earlier two sections and developed further in Part Three; namely, the rural folk discourse and the discourse of spirituality are ideologies that Kabnis is subject to but cannot master himself.

Kabnis, in the end, is a quintessential Modern protagonist who possesses markedly feeble social, emotional, and spiritual qualities; he is broken up and internally divided, bearing a fragmented identity. In fact, in the first section alone, Kabnis three times says to himself, “Pull yourself together.” On the surface these comments point to how anxious and unsettled Kabnis feels in the South, but on the subtextual level, along with the knowledge that Toomer was a poetic writer who took his diction very seriously, these commands to “pull yourself together” could indicate the fragmented nature of Kabnis’ psyche as he strives to reconcile and unite the spiritual, racial, and emotional
components of his identity. As was mentioned earlier, Toomer openly stated to Waldo Frank in a letter written just prior to *Cane*'s publication, "Kabnis is Me" (Toomer 151), so the author was not reluctant to admit to similarities between the evolution of this final protagonist and his own personal journey. Kabnis spends the duration of the six-segment dramatic piece casting about the community and trying to fit in with the Southern African Americans in hopes of connecting with the roots of his ancestors and thus his own identity. He assumes that making this connection with his heritage will provide meaning and wholeness to his existence, but capitalizing on the tropes of Modernism (which favor unsatisfying and complicated endings rather than implausible, romantic outcomes) and staying true to his subject, Toomer refuses to let Kabnis find peace. Instead, this character's anticlimactic struggle illustrates the flaws and problems Toomer saw in and for the black community contemporary to the time he was writing.

As well as demonstrating the characteristics of the Modern protagonist, Ralph Kabnis is a child of a distinctive and significant historical epoch. He grew up in the city and thus possesses no connection to his roots in the folk culture of rural Georgia. A larger connection between the Great Migration and the spiritual state of the African American community as it is represented in *Cane* can be useful to give Kabnis' character both social context and symbolic significance. In the article "What's in a Name? A Mystical and Symbolic Reading of Jean Toomer's 'Kabnis,'" Spenser Simrill summarizes the commonly held connection between the African American community in the early twentieth century and the Israelites exiled from Egypt in the book of Exodus in the Bible. Simrill reviews how the African Americans, like the Israelites, seem to be God's chosen people, in this instance seeking deliverance from white Americans rather than the biblical
Pharaoh (94). Simrill goes on to explain more ways the analogy holds: the Israelites found Canaan to be a land devoid of milk and honey just as the African Americans discovered the Northern cities to be economically and emotionally perilous. As the Israelites spent forty years wandering in the dehumanizing wilderness, so did the African Americans struggle to find an acceptable home in the spiritually arid urban landscape (95).

Simrill’s assessment of this component of “Kabnis” reinforces the concept that liminality is a central quality of Part Three and *Cane* in its entirety. The allegory Simrill notes also contains an implicit point regarding the involuntary nature of the exiles he compares. This detail is significant as it helps characterize the impetus behind the liminality for these two groups as they moved away from their home lands, and I believe it deserves closer examination. In both the case of the Israelites and the African Americans, the community’s departure was forced rather than assumed voluntarily. The conditions in both groups’ home lands were threatening the life of the community, making escape the only viable option. Simrill’s analysis adds a component of allegory and spiritual significance to my previously established focus on liminality. In fact, by the time the text reaches Part Three and Kabnis becomes a primary focus of the book, the concept of spirituality – the connection between the land, the ancestry, and the community – is strongly foregrounded, suggesting that this may be the most important component that Toomer felt was missing in the Northern, urban African American community as it struggled and failed to establish an acceptable identity for itself. A lack of spirituality, even more than problems of race or education or location, was the stumbling block that kept the community from successfully regenerating its identity and
claiming an equitable place in the greater whole of American society after the Great Migration.

The plot line of the Kabnis story is fairly simple. Ralph Kabnis has come to the South to serve as interim principal at an African American college. Raised in the North, Kabnis comes to rural Georgia expecting to find a homeland and a community into which he can fit comfortably and finally find a stable and satisfying sense of identity. However, Kabnis fails on both of these accounts. By the end of the piece, he has not evolved into a whole person, and if he has gained any sort of significant insight into the reason or source for the overwhelming sense of loss by which he is plagued, he does not take action to ameliorate his pain. This simple story, however, tends to resist clear interpretation. Critics frequently comment on the ambiguity of the piece; even W.E.B. DuBois is reported to have confessed, “I am not sure that I know what ‘Kabnis’ is about” (Simrill 90). Yet rather than uncertainty or confusion being a fault of the text, this puzzling quality leaves it capable of supporting multiple meanings simultaneously. As Toomer was a master of symbolism and poetic imagery, the subtext of this final piece is particularly rich and multivalent. My reading will focus primarily on the first and last sections of “Kabnis,” as I examine where the sense of liminality can be found in these passages and what its significance may be to the larger thematic and social purposes of Cane as a whole.

Early on in the first section of the drama, Kabnis laments that he cannot describe the relationship between dreams and reality. He ruminates, “The body of the world is bull-necked. A dream is a soft face that fits uncertainly upon it... God, if I could develop that in words” (Toomer 83). The wording suggests that, even though he just spoke, the words Kabnis uses do not, cannot, convey precisely what he intends. A strong sense of
disconnect arises out of this situation, and the Modernist crisis of representation and the
inability of language to convey true experience are articulated forcefully through Kabnis’
 lament. This feeling is extended at the end of the first section when Kabnis reflects, “Of
what lives, and God, of what dies in silence. There must be many dead things moving in
silence” (86). Silence can create a void, or, in this case, fill one, as a palpable and
significant silence dominates the space where language fails to express an experience
adequately. Kabnis seems to be aware of a large, silent presence in the rural South; that
presence suggests the many experiences that resist description, rich in both beauty and
pain, had there by African Americans living in the rural South as slaves. These are the
ancestors that Kabnis both longs and loathes to connect with. The power of the imagery
of darkness, the rural setting, and spirituality are put in check by the looming specter of
all that language fails to accomplish in terms of recreating genuine human experience.
Yet Toomer does not want these instances to be lost or forgotten, even though the rural
African American community, as it was before the Great Migration, must fade into the
past.

Ralph Kabnis, in one sense, seems to be Toomer’s attempt to try one more time to
find language that can describe the experience of the African American community as it
undergoes this massive transition. His close association with Toomer himself implies that
Kabnis is a poet-artist, yet on the page, Kabnis proclaims that he is an orator, and, in fact,
comes from a long line of orators (111). In this statement he attempts to tap into a
ritualistic mode of speaking that is particularly significant to African American culture:
oration. In doing so, not only does he strive to give himself some kind of cultural lineage
to make up for the fact that he is woefully disconnected from his racial heritage, but he
also takes up the mantle of the mouthpiece for the community. “I’ve been shapin words t
fit m soul,” (111) Kabnis the would-be orator declares, and the subtext of this
announcement indicates that the language this time will “fit” the experience and be able
to convey adequately an authentic version of reality.

Kabnis is a likely candidate to assay this task because of the very misery of his
circumstances. He is a worst-case-scenario product of the Great Migration: his identity is
woefully fragmented, and his struggle to articulate who he is and decide if and how he
can fit into the rural Southern community after being raised in the urban North illustrates
the problems Toomer anticipated arising out of the Great Migration. Kabnis is also an
artist, and so, in addition to his social struggles, he is wrestling with the prospect of
putting experience into words. And for all his proclamations and false bravado, the text
again remains true to its Modern style when this attempt at communication ultimately
fails.

When the audience first meets Ralph Kabnis, the protagonist sits huddled alone in
his rustic cabin in rural Georgia reading to himself in bed, as he is agitated and cannot
sleep. Shortly thereafter, an innocuous sound frightens Kabnis who rushes outdoors and
essentially confronts the Georgia night in a long soliloquy (Toomer 85). In this speech,
Kabnis comments on the beauty and ugliness of the night and the landscape. “Whats [sic]
beauty anyway but ugliness if it hurts you?” (85) Kabnis raves to the sky. These lines
echo the previously established duality illustrated in Part One and Part Two and the
binary remains unstable as its poles still do not represent genuine opposites. The
dichotomous characterization of the land will continue throughout the rest of the piece,
reinforcing the larger sense of liminality. As the countryside is called both beautiful and
ugly, it hovers between the two opposites and possesses traces of both, yet it refuses to settle decidedly into one or the other. The countryside itself, from Kabnis’ view, exists in a forced suspension of identity. As long as it is both beautiful and ugly, it can never be defined purely as one or the other, and thus even the land is trapped in a state of tension created by conflicting opposites.

The duality in nature echoes the duality in Kanbis’s own identity as it is established in the first images of Part Three. Kabnis is a product of opposites: not only are his parents black and white, but he was raised in an urban place while his roots are in the country. His hair is compared to silk, and he has a “lemon face” (Toomer 83), both of which are suggestive of the white heritage he possesses, which is presently clashing with the African American community to which he tries to belong. The description of his environment, too, emphasizes a growing discomfort at the presence of the mixing of dark and light, suggestive of Kabnis’ own discomfort with his ambiguous racial identity. The discursive binary of dark/light operates very strongly in the first scene, both sides vying for power. Kabnis’ surroundings are composed of stark juxtapositions between dark and light like the “whitewashed” hearth and chimney with black “sooty saw-teeth” biting into them or the walls which are unpainted and seasoned “a rosin yellow” showing black cracks between wide gaps (83). In both cases, the dark parts of the setting are represented negatively: the soot has stained the clean white chimney and the yellow walls are disrupted by the black gaps.

As the systems of light and dark imagery compete with each other, the narrative voice used for the portrayal of the surroundings clearly gives less value to the diction and imagery of darkness than to that of the light. Yet, this value system is turned on its head
when the Georgia night, another dark image, is described as stunningly beautiful only pages later (85); the conflict remains tense and unresolved as both light and dark are given various degrees of value by being represented positively and negatively. Instead of making one definitive representation of the dark imagery, here the text extends its liminality by refusing to settle and by remaining suspended between positive and negative representations of the same entity.

The discursive behavior of the text mirrors Kabnis’ conflicted feelings toward the white and black parts of his identity and all the cultural responsibilities inherent in each. He cannot properly access and possess absolutes of race and place, and thus does not know who he is or where he belongs. Kabnis exhibits psychological and spiritual frustration, identity confusion, internalized anxieties, and feelings of profound alienation; thus, he demonstrates the flaws that emerge when the community is separated from its homeland, and therefore its roots and its heritage. Though he does not fit into the black community in the rural South, Kabnis is indeed the quintessential representation of the Northern or urban African American; his pain is their pain, and his anxiety is Toomer’s own anxiety as he observed and reflected on the community he knew growing up in urban Washington, D.C. When reading the character Kabnis, it is important to recognize him not only as an individual character but also as a symbolic representative of many members of the black community in the urban North. Likewise, the local characters and situations Kabnis encounters in Sempter are signifiers of the rural South and African American homeland there as a whole. In such a light, this final piece “Kabnis,” the story of a stranger in a strange land illustrates the African American community as a whole as Toomer saw it.
The tension between protagonist and place that Toomer establishes early in the piece deepens in the middle of Kabnis’ aforementioned soliloquy when Kabnis calls out, “Dear Jesus, Do not chain me to myself and set these hills and valleys, heaving with folk-songs, so close to me that I cannot reach them” (85). The significance of this line is compounded as Kabnis begins with the appellation “Dear Jesus,” when he seems to be addressing the scenery itself, the countryside, and the dusky night sky. Here the text makes an implicit connection as the images of the rural countryside and the spiritual soul overlap: by addressing one, Kabnis seems, intentionally or not, to be addressing the other as well. In Part Three the discourses of the rural and the spiritual rise strongly to power and seem to intertwine in their significance both to each other and to the community as the hills and valleys are “heaving with folk-songs.” The land and the spirit of the community are one, and Toomer represents the land as a thing almost corporeal; the “heaving” land seems to be alive as it is described through Kabnis’ eyes, and the thing that gives it life is the folk songs, which express a vibrant spirituality.

There is another significant aspect of Kabnis’ request “not to chain [him] to [himself]” that merits closer explication. In this line, Kabnis reveals that in his current state he feels chained to himself. Not only does this language evoke images of slavery, bondage, and the era when blacks were violently oppressed by an institution, but it also suggests that Kabnis is trapped within the boundaries of his identity and longs to be freed. In this request, he is essentially asking to be granted the ability to move away from who he is now and become someone different. In this transformative change, he would have to experience, at least for a moment, a sense of liminality. Up until this point, I have represented liminality as a negative state, of being orphaned or dispossessed and lacking
a solid foundation, yet Kabnis’ request reveals the positive aspects of liminality as well. When one is suspended between two points, there is potential and hope to start again and to evolve; with fixity, on the other hand, comes stagnation. It would seem that the entire concept of liminality is destabilized with this one line. However, this positive illumination of the concept lasts only briefly; upon further consideration, an important caveat comes to light. The one flaw in Kabnis’ character that would keep him from achieving a positive outcome from a liminal state is that he lacks the agency to choose his destination. Liminality only brings hope when the liminal subject is empowered to direct his own path, and Kabnis is not. He has the capacity for solely effete gestures; the only strong element of his character is his own confusion.

The request not to be chained to himself, in one light, reveals Kabnis’ lack of agency and ability to take ownership of his identity. Instead of making progress toward connecting with his heritage, he flounders outside and alone, raving at an empty night sky. In another, more hopeful interpretation, his request, his “Dear Jesus,” could also be seen as a kind of prayer, or an expression of his longings to be connected to something transcendent, something beyond himself. This prayer-like statement, at this point in the drama, suggests Kabnis may be on the verge of some kind of spiritual awakening. This transformation will happen if Kabnis is ever able to reconcile the fragments of his divided psyche, accept all components of his heritage, and thus access the spirituality and the soil of the South, which have been metaphorically bound together at this point.

Later Toomer extends this metaphor when the character Lewis observes Kabnis to be “a promise of soil-soaked beauty; uprooted, thinning out. Suspended above the soil whose touch would resurrect him” (98). The language of this one line is steeped in
meaning. "Soil" and "uprooted" are suggestive again of the rural society of the South, and the act of planting can be read as both agrarian and spiritual. The spiritual tone is also supported by the image of "resurrection" that Toomer employs at the end, and by substituting soil as the agent of the redemption rather than the traditional substance of blood, Toomer is forging another strong connection between the land and the people, the spirituality and the identity of the community itself. This connection is supported by the phrase "soil-soaked" used at the beginning of the statement, where "blood-soaked" would be a more common phrase. By using the word "soil" where the reader expects to hear "blood," Toomer fuses a connection between these two entities that is almost imperceptible at first, but grows in strength as the image develops and the discourses of the spiritual and the rural weave themselves even more closely together. Lewis' observation of Kabnis is particularly perceptive; Lewis sees in Kabnis' longing for a connection that he cannot attain because the protagonist refuses to accept his slave heritage. Until he accepts his whole past, it seems that Kabnis will not be able to elicit strength and redemption from the land like others who are native to the South are able to.

Lewis is a significant character in his capacity to be Toomer's textual stand-in just as much as Kabnis is. Although Toomer has publicly stated that "Kabnis is Me," (Toomer 151) and Kabnis seems to represent the frustrated, confused, hurting side of Toomer, a careful reader can see in the characterization of Lewis the observant, intuitive, sympathetic side of the author. Lewis is another Northerner visiting the South, and he is able to understand Kabnis's struggles and tensions with a deep sensitivity. During their first meeting, Lewis says, "I see" as he turns to look at Kabnis, and when Lewis's and Kabnis's eyes meet, there is "a swift intuitive exchange of consciousness" (98). In this
moment of revelation, Lewis looks into Kabnis’ heart, sees his pain, recognizes his potential, and mourns the brokenness that leaves him paralyzed. Lewis is Toomer’s ideal version of himself: insightful and dispassionate enough to cope with the complicated and painful aspects of his identity that Kabnis would rather ignore. This may explain why, immediately after their instant of union, Kabnis is struck by a savage, twisting within himself mocking the impulse and rejecting Lewis’ tacit offer of brotherhood (98). The interaction between these two characters plays out a conflict that Toomer felt within his own personality, and the author’s inability to reconcile these two parts contributes to the sense of liminality pervading Cane.

Though every scene in “Kabnis” could be gleaned for symbolic significance, such a reading would be exhaustive. So now, after identifying the trajectory for character, thematic, and symbolic development established in the first scenes, I will shift my attention to section six, the final scene in the drama, to discover what kind of conclusion these threads have raveled into. By scene six, the protagonist has still failed to find his place in the community and connect with his past. Kabnis remains a lost, miserable soul with no personal connection to his roots in African American folk culture, which he sees plainly enough but is utterly unable to access within himself. Many critics complain that the plot of “Kabnis” is weak and contains no clear resolution or finale. However, while the plot may not provide a traditionally satisfying resolution, the imagery and discourse used in scene six move the thematic development of the piece along to an intense climax nonetheless. This final section demonstrates just how closely identity and language are connected and how both express the growing pains of a community caught in the middle of an epic transition.
While Kabnis fails to fulfill the oratorical role he tried to claim earlier, the
classic of Father John, introduced near the end of the play, stands in stark juxtaposition
to the protagonist in a variety of ways. Father John lives in the cellar below Halsey’s
workshop. Kabnis is reported to visit with the old man frequently (104), but the audience
only meets him for the first time when Kabnis and the other characters congregate in the
cellar for a night of furtive revelry. The narrator describes him “like a bust in black
walnut. Grey-bearded. Grey-haired. Prophetic. Immobile” (106), and the perceptive
Lewis, who is the only one to take significant notice of the old man as the group enters
the cellar, labels him as “a mute John the Baptist of a new religion – or a tongue-tied
shadow of the old” (106). Father John is mystical: a relic from and a reminder of the past.
The audience learns that Father John has been silent up to this point, but the old man
transforms into an orator before Kabnis’s (and the audience’s) very eyes during this
scene. Perhaps the most important detail of the elderly man’s characterization is his
ability to wake up and speak for the black community; he becomes the true orator.
Whereas Kabnis failed to put experience into words, Father John is able to sum up one of
the primary sins of the system of slavery, the fact that the white slave owners
manipulated certain Bible passages to justify their despicable practices. Father John’s
brevity and initial silence make him a rather ironic speaker, since that role of orator
usually requires that one be confidently articulate and able to speak at length. Father John
not fulfill these requirements, yet he is able to deliver a pithy message. After an initial
struggle Father John successfully finds his voice. He immediately begins to take on
qualities of a genuine orator as he speaks “remarkably clear [sic] and with great
conviction” (Toomer116). The one sentence that Father John musters, “O th sin th white
folk "mitted when they made th Bible lie" (117), does a better job of communicating the experience of the black community in the antebellum South than Ralph Kabnis is able to do, even with his superior command over grammar and vocabulary. Father John’s words have more truth in them, and thus more value, because he is genuinely rooted in the land: his spirituality and his black heritage remain intact. All of these things Kabnis has come to rural Georgia to claim, and all of them continue to elude his grasp because of the psychological barriers put in place while he grew up in the Northern, urban social milieu described in Part Two.

This scene also points to the glaring difference between the concepts of spirituality and religion as they are presented in *Cane*. Spirituality is the presence of the soul and the connection it has to ancestry, tradition, homeland, and community. Spirituality is treated as a positive concept that will sustain the community. Conversely, religion is represented in “Kabnis,” especially articulated by the character of Father John, as the force that helped the white slave owners subjugate their slaves and keep power out of the hands of the African Americans in the South. Religion is a tool used by the white community in the South to exert power unjustly over other human beings. Religion is represented in this text through earlier images like Barlo’s role as a vagrant preacher, a title which he uses only to impress women in “Esther” (Toomer 25), and the useless Bible thrown on the ruins of Becky’s house after she has been abandoned by both the white and black communities (9). Earlier in “Kabnis,” the protagonist himself even makes the observation that the Southern African Americans are, to his eyes, a “preacher-ridden race…and the preacher’s hands are in the white man’s pockets” (90). Again and again, religion is presented as an ideology of fraud and oppression that contrasts with the
concept of genuine spirituality, which is instead intended to strengthen and empower the individual. While spirituality is a concept that the narrative voice values, the narrator treats religion as a negative force due to its destructive role in the past. Father John brings the juxtaposition of religion and spirituality to a point; he is in a way the embodiment of many of the things spirituality represents: the past, community values, and a connection to the land; yet he speaks out against religion, proclaiming that the Bible was misused and members of his community suffered mightily because of it.

Kabnis' encounter with Father John and all of the symbolic significance carried with that scene comprises the closest thing to a climax "Kabnis" will produce. Simrill makes an acute observation in regards to Kabnis' relationship to Father John, positing that if Kabnis were to love Father John, it would be the first step on his journey toward spiritual and emotional unity in that he would be embracing a part of his heritage that he formerly rejected (93). In other words, it would be the first step toward Kabnis' transformation into Lewis. Yet, similar to his initial response to Lewis, instead of loving the old man, Kabnis feels revulsion. Father John is a foil to Kabnis in his capacity to connect with the spiritual world. The old man is something of a prophet archetype, partially blind and deaf, yet gifted with inner sight and a mystical sensibility. When he enters Father John's Hole and confronts the old man, Kabnis is symbolically coming face to face with the cultural and spiritual parts of himself that he has been disconnected from, and his initial disgusted reaction to the old man illustrates the cause of much of Kabnis' spiritual paucity and fragmented identity: this is a part of his past that he is reluctant to acknowledge and even more loathe to embrace. Father John's character contrasts with Kabnis' in that the old man presents a unified identity; Father John represents the
quintessential amalgamation of pieces that Kabnis cannot assemble. The hatred he feels for the old man, similar to the cynical antipathy he feels toward Lewis, is projected self-loathing at his own inability to forge and maintain any ties to the rural South, the land, his slave heritage, and the black community, all of which Father John possesses. Since Kabnis is unable to make peace with Father John by the end of the story, he is left just as spiritually and culturally empty as he was at the beginning.

In the face of the utter failure of the protagonist to reclaim ownership over his heritage, Toomer curiously ends the play with the figures bathed in the light of the rising sun. This choice problematizes the conclusion of the text since the book, and especially the “Kabnis” section, does not leave the reader with an overall sense of satisfaction or optimism. Three details from this final scene are particularly significant and worthy of closer explication: the de-robing of Kabnis, the bucket of dead coals he carries away, and the sunrise coming through the bars of Father John’s Hole. These are the final images Toomer chooses to conclude his Cubist portrait of the African American psyche during the liminal period of the Great Migration.

The significance of the first image concerns Kabnis’ recognition of the limitations on his role in the community. When Kabnis removes the robe he mockingly put on when he claimed he was an orator, it is the final step in acknowledging what he is not and will never be. Though he may be an artist and he may find many uses for language, Kabnis understands that he will never be able to speak entirely authentically and truthfully for the rural black community. He hangs up his robe as a sign of acceptance of this defeat. This act may also be an acknowledgement that the robe belongs in the cellar with Father John,
a true orator and prophet. In this gesture, Kabnis performs the action of a Modern anti-hero whose quest ends in defeat rather than triumph.

The second image builds on the previous gesture of concession, as Kabnis emerges from Father John’s Hole carrying a “bucket of dead coals” (117). The fire has gone out and the useless ashes are all that remain. Ashes are a curious symbol that can be interpreted in a variety of ways and thus, like so many other elements of Cane, resist clear definition and explanation. How characteristic of this intensely Modern text to move toward instability and obscurity at its conclusion rather than mustering a final, cohesive symbolic statement. To begin examining the significance of the ashes, their source must be acknowledged. They are the results of a fire that has burned and gone out. In this sense, the ashes are the remains left after the important action has passed. For instance, when a phoenix arises from death and reemerges out of a flame, the ashes are the remains of the former or dead self. And fire is also commonly associated with the home and the hearth; when only ashes are left, the hearth is cold, and the home loses its welcoming atmosphere, similar to the way the South has failed to be a suitable environment for Kabnis. This aspect is significant in its capacity to further the theme of liminality in the text. In Part Two, the urban centers are represented as unacceptable home lands for the African American community migrating from the rural South. The community settled into the North because it had to, but in doing so, it sacrificed an essential part of its identity, particularly its spiritual vivacity. Now Kabnis, child of the urban North, finds himself in the same situation as his forbearers, only he cannot find a place in the very land that they came from. In an ironic twist, Toomer has demonstrated
how the Great Migration transformed the identity of the African American community in a way that seems to be irreparable.

Besides indicating inhospitable conditions, in a more abstract way, fire, the source of the ashes, is also symbolic of hope and enlightenment, perhaps in this case connecting to the foolish hope Kabnis had that he could reconnect with his heritage, along with the enlightenment of his formal education that functionally set him apart from his brothers instead of allowing him to help them. For all of these bright "flames," Kabnis' experience in the South essentially ends fruitlessly, and so he is left only with the bucket of dead coals symbolic of his disappointment and disillusionment. Kabnis' gesture of taking up this bucket of dead coals and carrying them into the morning light is the only potentially redeeming gesture that keeps this scene from settling into complete disappointment. Perhaps he will take the ashes of the past and use them to kindle a new flame, symbolically renewing a sense of spirituality that will flourish in the developing African American community in the cities. This hope is implied, but Toomer does not show us whether it is realized or not. The fate of the bucket of coals is left in question, and it must be noted that in Kabnis, Toomer is expressing the anxieties he has for the generation of African Americans born during or after the Great Migration who are raised in the urban and Northern settings. All of the shortcomings and failures presented in Kabnis are only manifestations of larger trends Toomer saw or was afraid to see developing in the culture out of which Cane grew.

Immediately following the grim image of the ashes is the stark contrast of the sunrise that greets Kabnis as he makes his way up the cellar steps. The text is careful to point out how "light streaks through the iron-barred cellar window. Within its soft circle,
the figures of Carrie and Father John" (Toomer 117). Earlier, Carrie had respected and
nurtured Father John when Kapnis only scoffed at him. The fact that she is haloed in
sunlight along with the wise old soul suggests that she and Father John possess a grace
that Kapnis does not yet know. Kapnis is pointedly left out of the sunlight halo,
suggesting that he is not allowed to share such spiritual richness at this time; though the
fact that he is ascending from the cellar up into the sunlight suggests that this will not
always be the case. The cellar is also clearly represented as a cage or jail of sorts. The
discursive economy takes an interesting turn here; darkness has carried a positive
connotation just as often as a negative one, and in this scene, it is negative once again.
The light from the sun is “soft” and can penetrate the iron bars of the cellar, and so it
takes on a very positive, almost healing quality while the dark cellar is portrayed
negatively. Though the fire has died, here is a new source of light and hope that the text
offers as an alternative to bald despair.

_Cane_ is meant to be a swan song; it is meant to celebrate the dusk and glorify the
twilight as the text revels in the last flash of beauty emanating from a dying culture. So to
end with a sunrise rather than a sunset in a way seems to devalue all of the previously
established imagery. The ending does not correspond with the rest of the text or with the
symbolic system Toomer has spent the entire book constructing. In this unsettled or
uncomfortable ending, _Cane_ again stays true to its Modern tendencies. When the reader
is unsettled and the value system in the text become problematic, the images that we were
comfortable with before become defamiliarized. Light and dawn are suddenly
unwelcome and feel out of place, since they do not fit with the schemata of the rest of the
book. The sunrise could, ostensibly, simply represent hope at a new day, yet the
complexity of the rest of the book makes this elementary interpretation seem flimsy.

Toomer had noted before that the text had multiple start and end points, arcing from rural to urban to rural, simple to complex to simple, as well as simply following a chronological line (Toomer 152). Perhaps the problematic end of Part Three is meant to send the reader back to Parts One and Two to search for answers, thus continuing the cycle that Toomer intended. After all, the picture at the beginning of Part Three is an incomplete circle, not a whole one. So in providing a final image that only half satisfies and fits with the rest of the book, Toomer is staying true to what appears to be his original vision. Perhaps the end of the text is left intentionally unresolved, and, though frustrating, this is appropriate since the state of the African American community will continue to evolve and change. The text respects the continuing life of the community by refusing to give it a conclusion, good or bad. Especially in light of the Harlem Renaissance that was just emerging as Cane was published, this obscurely hopeful ending seems appropriate, or at least understandable.
CHAPTER FIVE – CONCLUSION

Even as it constructs characters, poems, vignettes, and a dramatic novella to demonstrate the precarious position of the African Americans’ identity while the community is in the process of a profound transformation both geographically and psychologically, the text of Cane offers possibilities and solutions to some of these issues. That is, Toomer’s text attempts to resolve many of the same conflicts that it creates surrounding the redefinition of the African American community’s identity during the Great Migration. Toomer’s racial philosophy is embedded in Cane, and its message is that race is of secondary importance to spiritual wholeness, a connection to one’s past, and a connection to the community. When placing Cane within the larger context of Toomer’s life-long growth, biographers Kerman and Eldridge claim that the book reflects just one stage in the developing picture of self in which Toomer attempted to universalize the individual’s experience. While some may view Cane in terms of a man trying to fit his human view into his blackness, Toomer was trying to fit the blackness that was part of him into a more comprehensive human view (115).

One aspect of this complicated, holistic view of the experience of the African American community that Toomer captured in Cane is the quality of constant motion. The liminal state of the community means that it is in the process of passing from one place to another, and the text reflects this movement by being so unsettled itself. The narrator’s voice modulates between the various pieces, and this stylistic element heightens the strength of the text’s thematic expression as well as brings a significant element of motion to the text. Dow asserts that Toomer’s frequent shifts in narratorial tone are an attempt to create unity out of fragmentation. Acknowledging that Toomer’s
narrative vision never reaches its goal of thematic and racial unification, Dow suggests that *Cane* does at least point the way down a path toward success:

The vision of racial unity that Toomer suggests, though not immediately realizable, can ideally lead to a modern sense of belonging (complicating, even going beyond, the black vs. white binary) that might eventually replace visible, concrete communities and redefine relational and national orders (62).

Dow touches on one of the most important functions of the sense of motion born out of the text’s liminality. Toomer’s articulation of narrator and characters carries the community’s identity beyond the strict boundaries of race. The narrator’s discourses also serve to represent various values of the community. And as the setting shifts the atmosphere changes along with it; the form of the text moves through a montage of poetry, short stories, vignettes, and drama. Nothing about this text is static.

The motion, in part, represents the evolution of the community as it moves away from an undesirable situation in the rural South toward less settled but potentially promising circumstances in the urban North where one day race will not be the critical component of identity. The sense of motion is quite salient in Part Two, and though the cities are largely depicted negatively, they are awarded this important and valuable quality of motion that suggests they are at least progressive, whereas the South was static and, in fact, stagnant. The African American community experienced a monumental transformation during the Great Migration. The community had previously moved beyond the bounds of slavery, but had not entirely reached the status of “free” yet either, as African Americans had still not achieved social, political, nor economic equality.
African Americans were on the threshold of an improved social position, and occupying that liminal space, though uncertain, was decidedly better than remaining in the place from which they started.

With *Cane* Toomer creates a text in which the boundaries of identity and culture are blurred during the liminal epoch when many African Americans were uprooting their families from the rural South and moving North to cities in search of a higher standard of living and a better quality of life. Often the text seems to express a latent desire to transcend the arbitrary strictures on identity imposed by society and move toward unity.¹⁵ *Cane* raises important questions about spirituality and its connection to nature and the Earth, and the book radicalizes the concept of darkness. Throughout the text of *Cane*, Toomer plays with the connotations and implications of darkness. He complicates and problematizes the audience’s experience with light and dark in order to destabilize any preconceived assumptions his readers may be bringing to his text. Kerman and Eldridge point out that, due to his mixed background, Toomer’s appearance was such that he could be identified with any group in America (usually black or white but sometimes Indian or Persian) but could not be contained within any such identification (144). The text mimics this same resistance as it is reluctant to adhere to one definite reading. Toomer first manages to deconstruct the accepted meaning of darkness and blackness in his text, and then to redefine it in a new way, which correspond to his proposed solution to the problem of race and identity – a rejection of the black/white binary system in favor of a more complex but accurate continuum containing many gradations of color.

The concept of color, as it pertains to race, is another element of *Cane*’s portrayal of the African American identity affected by the liminality of the Great Migration. Color
is a concept that the text frequently addresses through the competing discourses of dark and light, yet the conflict between these two forces is never reduced or resolved in a satisfactory way. Again, transcendence to the realm of spirituality that leaves color and race behind seems to be the larger answer that the text offers. The connotations behind blackness and darkness in *Cane* are significant in terms of their implications toward African American identity. *Cane* was written by a black author during the Harlem Renaissance, and is evidently trying to demonstrate the power, beauty, intelligence, and potential of members of the black community. Yet, the entire first portion of the text uses dusk imagery and pending darkness in a negative way. Darkness is associated with death; it is the ominous force that is signaling the imminent and permanent ending to a way of life. In this way, the discourse of darkness is represented as an empty space or a vacuum, and positions itself as an undesirable state. Interestingly, it is this color, this state then, that the characters of *Cane* carry around in their very skin.

The text challenges readers to acknowledge the negative symbolic aspects of darkness, while at the same time making the dark-skinned people who are its protagonists vividly sympathetic and compelling characters, and when the skin tone of each is described, the word "black" is often, though not always, replaced with a shade of brown. The text favors the notion of race as a continuum between white and black as the narrator uses diction that highlights how many different degrees of color there are. Karintha’s skin is “like dusk on the eastern horizon” when the sun goes down, implying an inky black like the darkest edge of the night sky’s rim (Toomer 3); Carma has a “yellow flower face” (12), while Fern’s face “flowed in soft cream foam” (16); Carrie Kate, Halsey’s little sister, has an “oval-olive” face (103); and Lewis is a “copper-colored man” (97).
As the idea of blackness becomes filled with the identities of all of *Cane*'s characters, it grows full and whole rather than empty and bleak.

This stark juxtaposition is another element of the African American identity portrayed by the text. It may be indicative of an internalized racism experienced by many African Americans when they saw their own color as ugly or unacceptable. However, I believe that its purpose is more complex and multifaceted than that. The way that *Cane* requires darkness to contain such dualism also suggests that the definitions of good and bad are in flux at this significant and liminal time in history. Dusk precedes the night, which is the time when darkness reigns, a time when black is the most common color. So perhaps *Cane* uses twilight imagery to redefine dusk not as the death of the day but as the birth of night. Certainly the Harlem Renaissance was a time of cultural rebirth, and Battenfield writes that leaders trusted in the power of this awakening to diminish oppressive social conditions (1241). *Cane* celebrates not the achievement of this goal, but the dissolution of boundaries that will allow for progress toward such an accomplishment. This dissolution would be impossible without the liminality created by the transition made during the Great Migration. As it lauds the possibility of an era of African American cultural development, the text simultaneously lays bare many disturbing and problematic issues surrounding race and its relationship to identity. In fact, I believe that while the text takes great pains to create and compound the tension between the positive and negative connotations of darkness, it also intentionally leaves these issues unresolved in order to leave room to explore other elements of the African American identity like spirituality, ancestry, and social context.
The liminality created by the Great Migration created a fertile landscape for someone with Toomer's intelligence and social sensitivity to identify and hypothesize about the bending and shifting of boundaries in terms of identity. In *Cane*, Toomer is seeking to redefine the lines of the African American community's identity in such a way that they are not dependent on color. Instead, the text suggests that identity is created out of a combination of a spiritual connection to one's past and participation in a variety of cultural communities. *Cane* demonstrates the plurality inherent in the idea of race that was essential to Toomer's purpose. However, the text only goes so far as to introduce the concept of a new American race; *Cane* never allows the boundaries of identity that are in flux to seize on one absolute answer. By avoiding definition, the identity of the community also avoids simplification and stagnation. *Cane* represents the beauty of fluidity and the hope intrinsic in the act of evolution.


Hutchinson, George B. “Jean Toomer and the ‘New Negros’ of Washington.”


74 – 89.


Van Mol, Kay R. “Primitivism and Intellect in Toomer’s Cane and McKay’s Banana Bottom: The Need for an Integrated Black Consciousness.” Negro American
' Also called the Johnson-Reed Act, this legislation included the National Origins Act and the Asian Exclusions Act. Its aim was to limit the number of Southern and Eastern European immigrants allowed into the United States. This reduction left certain types of jobs open, and African Americans seeking to leave the lagging economy in the rural South migrated North in order to fill them.

" For Toomer, Cane represented a successful unification of parts that he could not otherwise reconcile within himself. This is ironic in light of the clearly fragmented nature of the book, which contains so many disparate forms, characters, and locations, yet, according to the biography The Lives of Jean Toomer written in 1987 by Cynthia Earl Kerman and Richard Eldridge, "As the formation of the book evolved, Toomer could join the parts together into a whole because the motive for his writing stemmed from a single source: fitting his own racial parts into a unified whole" (79). The complexity of form and content conveyed through the text just hints at what kind of overlapping, conflicting, and emotionally-charged factors Toomer had to sort through when he was coming to terms with his own identity and place in society.

iii From the time he was in college, Toomer felt an intense sense of duality and complexity within himself. According to Kerman and Eldridge, at this point in his life Toomer began to construct two different worlds in which he would live simultaneously: one a world of his own based on fancies and rationalizations, and the other a place where he looked around and questioned the world he saw and the way he was to fit into it (65). This behavior demonstrates Toomer’s capacity to feel and express the complicated nature of the identity and the relationship between the individual and community, which would serve him well when writing Cane.

iv Given Toomer’s life-long quest for personal unity and his belief that he was the first member of the new American race (Helbing 144), it would make sense for him to implement one narrator to occupy many roles within the black communities of the urban North and rural South. This narrator would occupy the role that Toomer sought to fill; if his narrator could achieve wholeness, perhaps, Toomer may have hoped, he could achieve such unity himself some day, as well.

v In their biography, Kerman and Eldridge include a letter Toomer wrote to Waldo Frank while he was in Sparta. In his letter, Toomer writes that he is especially touched by how deeply the African Americans in rural Georgia seem to feel things, and when these feelings become too intense, they “overflow in song” (89). Toomer seems to have appropriated this same behavior into his text, and when the narrator’s feelings of grief or tenderness become too strong, say for a character like Karintha, the text itself breaks out of its prescribed prose structure and erupts into a folk spiritual.

vi According to Kerman and Eldridge, Toomer had been an avid and careful observer of people ever since he was a child and would often try to guess what passers-by were thinking and feeling by looking at their faces: “This childhood hobby...became the genesis of a lifelong fascination with motivations and inner complexities, which served him both in his fiction and in his later efforts to reshape that mixture in people themselves” (40). Clearly this practice helped make Toomer an excellent “reader” of others, which he then translated into the ability to create vivid and meaningful facial expressions on his characters wherein small movements and details carry large and significant meaning, as with Fern’s head tilt. As a child Toomer was also given a camera with which he loved to play. According to Kerman and Eldridge, it was through his experimentation with photography that Toomer learned the art of selection and arrangement of details and was able to hone his ability to build a pattern from existing materials (40). These skills emerge fully functional in the composition of Cane.

vii There is also a distinct sexual aspect to Toomer’s description of Fern. The implication of such a point reaches beyond the scope of this paper, yet a study of Toomer’s treatment of Fern, and, indeed, of women throughout Cane, would certainly yield a rich and complex reading of the role of gender in community identity.

viii The reverse of Fern’s situation and relationship to the land appears in the character of Avey from Part Two. Avey is similar to Fern in the way both women have a tendency to draw men to them and then disappoint. However, Avey lives in Washington, D.C., so, unlike Fern, she is able to exist in the city. One key different between the two women arises when the narrator describes Avey’s eyes and face as she watches the sun rise over the city: Avey’s face is pale and her eyes are heavy. The narrator specifically notes that “she did not have the gray crimson-splashed beauty of the dawn” (Toomer 49). Though Avey
can and does live in the city, whereas Fern cannot, Avey's appearance does not reflect the close connection to the natural environment that Fern's does, and the narrator seems to represent this as a flaw in Avey's character that points to her lack of spirituality. Again, the imagery of nature seems to be highly valued by the narrator and also closely connected to spirituality, as he uses the absence of such beauty from Avey's face to suggest her lack of spirituality and connection to other African Americans where she lives.

According to Kerman and Eldridge, Toomer himself admitted that *Cane* was a swan song because the rural South as it had been for so many years was being destroyed by industrialization and modernism. Toomer wrote in his autobiography that though the soil and earth were still there, a genuine return to nature was impossible because there was no pure, natural South anymore. In his words, "Yes the modern world was uprooted, the modern world was breaking down, but we could not go back [author's italics]. There was nothing to go back to" (116). The African American community was coping with a forced liminality, an experience much more traumatic and damaging than if they had elected to move entirely of their own accord. The anxiety and dismay caused by this forced movement is expressed poignantly in Part Two.

Naming is a very important concept in relation to Toomer's nature. Toomer did not particularly like the name he was given at birth, Nathan Pinchback Toomer (Kerman and Eldridge 28). Eugene was added to his name once his father, Nathan Toomer, abandoned his mother and she moved back in to her father's house. Later Toomer would again alter the Eugene to Jean in an act of ownership over his identity and control over his public persona. The naming of his characters is also significant and has artistic import. The act of naming, and particularly of creating names to suit a particular person, occasion, or mood, is a trait Toomer picked up from a man he greatly admired: his grandfather Pinckney B. S. Pinchback. Coining nicknames was a habit Toomer kept all his life (Kerman and Eldridge 28). Undoubtedly in a literary work such as this, readers must assume that the names for the different characters are chosen carefully and meant to offer insights into the characters' personalities and situations. Rhobert is a particularly accessible case. In her book *Split-Gut Song*, Karen Jackson Ford points out that the name Rhobert is an anagram of the word "brother." Ford asserts that Toomer used the name with this particular spelling to allude to the way the brotherhood or sense of community between African Americans was disrupted or mixed up, and thus rendered ineffective, in the urban milieu (68). This use of anagram is evidence of one more way Toomer uses language to make meaning simultaneously on a variety of levels. The text does a lot of "work" in a small amount of space since each word carries so much meaning; Toomer's poetic use of language demands that we closely examine and contemplate almost every word that he uses in order to pick up on the multivalent nature of meanings in his text. In this way, the text mirrors the complexity of language in the African American community, especially the coded modes of speaking that were used around whites to subvert the social hierarchy of power as it was performed through language.

To return again to the issue of the polyphonic narrative voice in *Cane* that I represent as one narrator employing a variety of modulations, Dow makes an insightful observation regarding the narrator of "Calling Jesus." He asserts that this vignette gives no priority to any of the narrative voices, suggesting that the narrative has a variant core that is essentially a sequence of voices which can be presented in a number of ways. The narrative and social interaction therefore seems to become something that exists independently of and prior to narrative presentation (77). Dow goes on to acknowledge that, at the same time, the tension created between these often-conflicting voices echoes Toomer's own multiethnic biological makeup, his unease over his connection to black American, and his unrealizable efforts to reach his goals of thematic and social unification (87).

Kerman and Eldridge point out that Kabnis, like Toomer himself, is ambivalent about his racial identification (97). Toomer was working out his racial identity as he was shaping his book and did not see himself as black or white. Oddly, Kabnis is not overly preoccupied with skin-tone and the racial aspects of his identity as he struggles in the South, rather, he yearns for spiritual wholeness and a connection to his past. These were Toomer's concerns as well, again reinforcing the statement Toomer made to Waldo Frank, "Kabnis is Me."

Toomer wanted to have "Kabnis" performed in the theater, but no director would take up his play for this very reason. All claimed the plot was too weak to be successful on the stage (Toomer 83)

This could either point to the captivity the slaves experienced in the old South which Kabnis faced and rejected in Father John's Hole, or the fact that the actions that went on in the hole - Kabnis' refusal to accept his past, will inhibit his spiritual development.

This tendency toward transcendence and a focus on spiritual unity rather than physical concerns, of which race would be one, increased throughout Toomer's life. The ideas broached in *Cane* represent only
the beginning of Toomer’s exploration of identity, which would eventually lead him toward mysticism for a time. After the literary period of his life, Toomer went to study with the philosopher Georges Ivanovitch Gurdjieff, searching for answers to questions about cosmic laws, man’s place in the world, and how to become whole (Kerman and Eldridge 128). Especially the latter two topics seem to have been weighing heavily on Toomer’s mind while he was working on *Cane*. The contemplation of finding his place racially, which led to the composition of *Cane*, seems to have led him to larger questions about his place in a more spiritual and global sense.

xi George B. Hutchinson wrote an enlightening and useful article about the social and racial circles Toomer traveled in before and while he was writing. Many of the points Hutchinson make shed light on the themes and goals of *Cane* and invite the reader to make connections between the community Toomer sought to represent and his own identity. In “Jean Toomer and the ‘New Negroes’ of Washington,” Hutchinson points out how Toomer often associated with whites from the North, who were mainly left-wing writers and intellectuals (685). Hutchinson also explores the way Toomer himself was able to “pass” as white when he was out in public; Toomer was a walking example of the blurred boundaries between the concepts of “blackness” and “whiteness” that appear in *Cane*. In light of Hutchinson’s analysis, Toomer himself appears to be a liminal figure, hovering between many boundaries of race, class, and geography.

xvii Kerman and Eldridge note a comment Toomer made that throughout his life, his tastes for women were governed by a duality in which “fair and dark existed side by side.” According to the biography, Toomer’s first love was a girl from his childhood neighborhood, who was white, while his mother was darker skinned (95). These two earliest objects of his affection seem to have led him to consider women on a wide spectrum of skin tones from dark to light. They may also have allowed Toomer to be more attentive to the many shades of dark and light skin that exist, which we see in *Cane* through his specific description of each character’s skin tone.

xviii Hutchinson noted that Toomer considered himself to be the first conscious member of what he conceived to be a “new race” coming into being in the United States (690). This race, Toomer believed, was a mixture of all of the “older” races. The conclusion follows then, that Toomer would not feel a need to resolve the tension between positive and negative perceptions of blackness in *Cane*, since black was merely the label of one of the “old races.” Instead of dwelling on points that he believed would be rendered moot, the author preferred to “promote transcendence rather than the hardening of the racial categories” (28), as Werner Sollors puts it in his essay, “Modernism and Race.” Sollors calls Toomer “a philosophical spirit in a world of racial antagonisms” (28), and it is fitting that such a philosophical mind would rather cope with the problems and conflicts of race by essentially thinking his way out rather than tackling them from a traditional direction.