

Nothing But a Good Man Feeling Bad: How Toomer Sings the Blues in *Cane*

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English

Oh! The blues ain't nothing
Oh! The blues ain't nothing
Oh! The blues ain't nothing
But a good man feeling bad

—Lee Roy “Lasses” White
“Negro Blues”

Sing the blues. Anybody in at least his or her teens has heard this phrase and generally understands what it means. To sing the blues is to express despair, typically through music although *sing* could also represent other forms of expression. However, because that generic interpretation has become so commonplace, we seldom stop to consider what the blues really represents and why it is so effective at conveying emotion. Blues historian William Barlow reminds us that the origins of the blues come out of “the collective expression of the experiences of a new generation of African Americans born after slavery but still living with its legacy, still caught up in a life-or-death struggle for survival and freedom” (8). Jean Toomer’s *Cane* evokes the cultural essence of the blues by employing techniques that actually transform Toomer’s novel into a form of blues itself.

Critics have made comparisons between *Cane* and the blues, but they almost invariably do so to support *Cane* as an elegy for the southern black folk culture, which was dying out during the Great Migration of the early twentieth century, as masses of southern African Americans relocated to the urban centers of the north. A. Yemisi Jimoh’s analysis provides a good example of this interpretation:

Certainly Toomer perceives that black folk culture in the United States is dying as the modernism of an urban machine culture changes the expressive lives of African Americans from a deep and complex resonance of emotions found in the paradox of the Spirituals to a deep yet fragmented, many-layered, complex Jazz expressive attitude that confronted the contradictions of African American life with a musical boldness that slavery had limited but not eliminated. (15)

For critics like Jimoh, the blues are merely a metaphor in *Cane*, something to symbolize the old south and contrast against the popular new jazz sounds representing Harlem and other northern cities of the 1920s. I want to argue that Toomer is not merely evoking the spirit of the blues as a kind of historical reference; he is actually mimicking the blues, in a sense crafting the entire book as one long blues verse. Structurally and aesthetically, the book is not *symbolic* of the blues but actually *functions* as blues. The result is that reading *Cane* offers a similar experience to listening to the blues. To compare these two experiences, I want to examine three important virtues of the blues that also emerge in *Cane*: (1) the blues are rebellious; (2) the blues are communal; (3) the blues are cathartic. Through this comparison, I hope to show that *Cane* is ultimately a positive and inspirational novel, one that celebrates life by finding the beauty that makes the racism, hatred, and violence bearable and, like the music it mimics, provides “a joyful experience, a vibrant affirmation of life and its possibilities in an appropriate esthetic form” (Cone 31).

The blues evolved from black spiritual songs, or what W. E. B. Du Bois fittingly called “Sorrow Songs” (154). James H. Cone describes the blues as “secular spirituals,”

and although the spirituals rose out of life during slavery whereas the blues deal with post-slavery existence, they both provide an important voice for the black experience: “Like the preacher in the church, they proclaimed the Word of black existence, depicting its joy and sorrow, love and hate, and the awesome burden of being ‘free’ in a racist society when one is black” (102). Toomer shows an understanding of this association between religion and music in a letter to his friend and fellow writer Waldo Frank: “Have you ever been in a Negro church? Not the white-washed article of respectable colored folks; but the shanty of the peasant Negro. God, but they *feel* the thing. Sometimes too violently for sensitive nerves; always sincerely, powerfully, deeply. And when they overflow in song, there is no singing that has so touched me” (152). The transformative power of music Toomer describes here is what he strives for in his own version of the blues.

Depending on how broadly one wishes to stretch the term, the blues genre can encompass a wide range of styles. However, when we talk about a traditional blues song, we are typically referring to what is known as a twelve-bar blues format. In a twelve-bar blues, each verse has only three chords and three lines of lyrics. The chords are familiarly referred to as the I, IV, and V (one, four, and five) chords, and each of the three lines is sung over one chord. Lyrically, the first two lines are identical while the third is unique and forms a rhyme with the first two. As an example, here are the lyrics to the first verse of Robert Johnson’s “Cross Road Blues” with the accompanying chords noted in parentheses:

(I) I went down to the cross road, fell down on my knees

(IV) I went down to the cross road, fell down on my knees

(V) Asked the lord above, "Have mercy, save poor Bob if you please."

To summarize, the only thing that changes between the first and second lines is the chord—the background or setting, if you will. The third line is unique both musically and lyrically but obviously still connects to the first two lines in its meaning and rhyme. With this in mind, we can see that *Cane* is structured like the verse of a blues song. The book is divided into three sections, the first two sections being similarly structured: a mix of short prose narratives and poems with the sequence typically being one prose piece followed by two poems followed by another prose piece, etc. (although the second section deviates at times from this exact pattern). The major difference between the first two sections is the setting; the first section takes place in rural Georgia while the second section is set in northern cities (mostly Washington D.C.). In this way, the book closely follows the first two lines of a blues song—what changes is the background (the chord in a song or the setting in *Cane*) while the lyrics/text remain similar. The third section of *Cane* is completely different from the first two. It consists of only one very long piece, "Kabnis," which itself differs from any other piece in the book in both its length and its resemblance to a stage play format, where the dialogue is indicated by the character's name and a colon rather than traditional quotation marks. This makes "Kabnis" stand out from any of the other pieces in the book, and the third section as a whole stands out in that it only contains one long piece rather than several short pieces. Thus, the third section follows the blues structure of the V chord by being completely distinct from the first two sections. In this way, the entire structure of *Cane* mimics a twelve-bar blues verse—the first two sections merely change the background while the third section is completely different.

The book also has a circular structure implied by the semi-circle images at the beginning of each section, which encourages us to think of the book looping back upon itself the same way that the end of a blues verse will take us back to the first chord and the first line of the next verse. Although this structure may be too subtle to be immediately evident upon our first reading, Toomer manages to subconsciously prepare us for an experience that is akin to listening to the blues.

Using the blues structure in *Cane* provides unity to a text that might otherwise seem sprawling and disjointed. It encourages us to look for reverberations and contrasts in a larger framing. The noticeable change in setting between sections one and two forces us to consider the role that location plays in the characters' lives and how they might be different if they lived elsewhere. Gossip, for instance, plays an important role in section one's "Becky" and section two's "Bona and Paul" but with very different results. In the southern-based "Becky," the bitter and vocal gossip over the white Becky and her two black sons leads to her exile. Both the black and white community can be considered responsible for her death, for driving her into isolation and then neglecting her. In the Chicago-based "Bona and Paul," the gossip has a more passive nature. Nobody directly confronts or acts out against the light-skinned Paul, but continually hearing the rumors about his race and sensing the stares of others upon him causes him to feel separate from other people. Rather than drive him away, this separation actually supplies him with a sense of identity: "Their stares, giving him to himself, filled something long empty within him, and were like green blades sprouting in his consciousness. There was fullness, and strength and peace about it all. He saw himself, cloudy, but real" (74). Whereas the gossip in the south drives Becky into isolation, the gossip in the north creates a sense of

individualism in Paul. The contrasts in these two stories reveal subtle distinctions between the two geographic regions that we might not have considered otherwise, and it demonstrates how the blues structure of *Cane* helps us navigate throughout the seemingly disparate poems and stories.

Toomer also uses language to mimic the blues, especially in his use of repetition. In the same way that a twelve-bar blues repeats the first two lines, Toomer frequently repeats phrases and verses, and just as repeated blues lyrics deliver a slightly different emotional response for the listener because of the chord changes underneath, these repeated lines and verses in *Cane* create different responses in the reader based on when they appear in the text. As Gayl Jones notes, “Repetition in this tradition does not mean stasis, but change/new recognition; a turning point or carrying forward of experience follows each repeated line” (Jones 299). In *Cane*’s opening piece, “Karintha,” a lyrical verse appears at the beginning and end of the narrative:

Her skin is like dusk on the eastern horizon,
 O cant you see it, O cant you see it,
 Her skin is like dusk on the eastern horizon
 ...When the sun goes down. (5)

This passage seems lovely when we first encounter it. The image of dusk on the horizon conjures up warm, orange sunsets, and the echoing second line, “O cant you see it, O cant you see it,” invites us to share in appreciating this woman’s beauty. However, this passage takes on a very different feel when we reencounter it after hearing Karintha’s story. By now we have seen how Karintha has been an object of sexual desire since she was a young girl, how the men around her continually lust after her as she grows, and

how she indulges their desires even though she has “contempt for them” (6). We have seen how she uses her beauty to win money and affection from men and how she apparently abandons (possibly even kills) her own baby in the woods. When this lyrical passage reappears at the end, dusk no longer feels like a warm sunset; it feels like death, like smoldering ash, or as Toomer says, like the soul of a “growing thing ripened too soon” (6). The echo of “O cant you see it, O cant you see it” is no longer an invitation but a condemnation: Why didn’t we see what was happening to Karintha? Why did we allow her to be treated like an object? Couldn’t we have predicted what she would become because of it? The verse still retains its beauty and lyrical quality in and of itself, but the perceived change in tone forces us to pause and reflect. “If the introductory verse raises a question,” Jones says, “the repeated last verse does not answer it completely, but makes the question more complex in light of the whole experience” (Jones 297). The story would still be powerful without this passage, but its inclusion, and specifically its repetition, adds that emotional sensation that music can produce without words. This is the type of effect Jones refers to when she says, “One not only *reads* Toomer, one *hears* him; his words live beyond the page, full of rhythm and metaphor, sight and sound, lyrical drama. His work has the dynamics, the spring and seasoning of speech and music” (297).

Besides repetition, improvisation is another technique almost synonymous with the blues. Barlow calls it “the centerpiece of the blues performers’ aesthetic approach to their medium” (326). But given the fixed nature of a literary text, it would seem difficult to be able to mimic improvisation. As Sherley A. Williams notes in her essay, “The Blues Roots of Contemporary Afro-American Poetry,” “Blues is essentially an oral form meant

to be heard rather than read; and the techniques and structures used to such powerful purpose in the songs cannot always be transferred directly to the literary traditions within which, by definition, Afro-American poets write” (542). Nonetheless, Toomer manages to infuse a sense of spontaneity and performance into *Cane* through wordplay and stream of consciousness that give his writing a “live” feel. In “Seventh Street,” after an introductory verse, the narrator proceeds to riff in prose form:

Seventh Street is a bastard of Prohibition and the War. A crude-boned, soft-skinned wedge of nigger life breathing its loafer air, jazz songs and love, thrusting unconscious rhythms, black reddish blood into the white and whitewashed wood of Washington. Stale soggy wood of Washington. Wedges rust in soggy wood...Split it! In two! Again! Shred it!...the sun. Wedges are brilliant in the sun; ribbons of wet wood dry and blow away.

(41)

Although formatted as prose, this passage feels closer to the lyricism of poetry. Images fly by at breakneck pace without seeming to form any cohesive narrative. Instead, wordplay unifies the passage and places the emphasis on the language itself, especially its aural quality. The second sentence, for instance, ends with a tongue-twister: “the white and whitewashed wood of Washington.” In addition to the alliteration, the words *white* and *wash* each appear twice, either on their own or as part of a larger word. Although the implication in its meaning is serious—Toomer calls attention to the fact that the nation’s capital is dominated by white society—it is presented in a playful and humorous manner, which Williams argues is a key component of the blues: “The blues singer strives to create an atmosphere in which analysis can take place. This necessary analytic distance is

achieved through the use of verbal and musical irony seldom found in the singing of the spirituals or the gospels” (544). This tongue-twister section in “Seventh Street” also introduces the wood motif that dominates the rest of the passage. The next two sentences are linked by the phrase “soggy wood,” which suggests that the white controlled wood is old and weak. Then comes an abrupt and aggressive interruption: “Split it! In two! Again! Shred it!” This feels like a different voice, like someone unexpectedly barging in and urging the narrator and reader to take action and chop down that soggy wood, in other words to attack the white control of the country. After this brief interruption, we return to what feels like the original narrator’s voice as he describes the now shredded ribbons of wood blowing away. What we see here is that the entire passage does have a logical and linear flow but has been deliberately constructed to give the impression of a loose, improvised performance.

Another way in which Toomer can be seen to improvise is by describing the interiority of a character’s thoughts in a seemingly off-the-cuff, stream of consciousness manner. A good example is Dorris in “Theater,” who notices John lusting after her during dance rehearsal and speculates on what will happen if she gives into him:

I bet he can love. Hell, he cant love. He’s too skinny. His lips are too skinny. He wouldnt love me anyway, only for that. But I’d get a pair of silk stockings out of it. Red silk. I got purple. Cut it, kid. You cant win him to respect you that away. He wouldnt anyway. Maybe he would. Maybe he’d love. I’ve heard em say that men who look like him (what does he look like?) will marry if they love. O will you love me? And give me kids, and a home, and everything? (I’d like to make your nest, and

honest, hon, I wouldnt run out on you.) You will if I make you. Just watch me. (53)

In this scene, Dorris becomes lost in her own thoughts. She contradicts herself (“I bet he can love. Hell, he cant love”), rebukes herself (“Cut it, kid. You cant win him to respect you that away.”), gets sidetracked wondering which color stockings to ask for, and finishes with a boastful threat. Her tone ricochets between anger, defeatism, hopefulness, materialism, and menace. She cannot stay focused; too many thoughts are swirling around inside her. Toomer depicts Dorris’ thought process like an improvised performance that has to explore and discover itself during its creation. In this case, the conflicting tones and self-contradictions provide the irony and distance that Williams says is necessary in order to allow analysis. By the end, we have a better sense than Dorris does of what she really wants—not John himself, but the comfort and stability he can provide.

Up until now, we have examined some specific ways in which *Cane* mimics the performance of the blues, but what are some of the larger, overall effects that this has on our reading? What are some of the key virtues that distinguish the blues, and how can they help us to better understand *Cane*? First, the blues are rebellious. They rebel against white culture in a number of ways but first and foremost in how antithetical the music is to classical European music. Rather than assimilate Europe’s musical traditions, blues musicians contradict it: “The trick in blues harmony is in the so called ‘blue note.’ The third, fifth, and seventh notes of the major scale are flatted, diminished to produce chords that can only truly come together in a quarter tone” (Cager 58). This is essentially to say that a “blue note” is not a perfectly pitched note but one deliberately played slightly out

of tune. This not only affects how the music is performed but, as Elijah Wald explains, plays a major role in the choice of instrumentation: “Many of the most popular blues instruments—the slide guitar, the harmonica, the saxophone, and the standard guitar as played by note-bending virtuosos like Lonnie Johnson and B. B. King—are favored specifically because they can play those ‘in-between’ notes” (6). A singer’s voice, which is his or her instrument, also needs to be able to meet these expectations: “Any good blues singer uses a broad range of microtones and moves between them with a freedom and subtlety that cannot be captured in Western notation” (Wald 6). The preferred instruments for the blues, therefore, differ sharply from the kinds of string and woodwind instruments typically found in a classical orchestra, and a vocalist’s ability to sing the blues does not rely so much on his or her vocal range (which is critically important in opera, for instance) but on his or her ability to employ these imperfect “blue notes.” All this is to say that the fundamental prerequisites for the blues are the antithesis of those in classical music.

Similarly, we can see *Cane* as rebelling against the conventions of European literature through its unorthodox and sometimes inscrutable style. Its format resists categorization (Is it a novel? An anthology? A story cycle?), which presents a challenge in how to approach reading and discussing it. Also, its narrative style is jarring (pieces often leap about temporally and switch perspectives suddenly), and its expressionistic language can frustrate readers seeking a clearer meaning. The beginning of “Rhobert” demonstrates this rebellious literary style that might frustrate and discourage readers: “Rhobert wears a house, like a monstrous diver’s helmet, on his head. His legs are banty-bowed and shaky because as a child he had rickets. He is way down. Rods of the house

like antennae of a dead thing, stuffed, prop up in the air. He is way down. He is sinking” (42). The first sentence must certainly be a metaphor, but for what? Dropping us into this image without any grounding disorients us and creates a kind of sink-or-swim moment—we feel in danger of drowning if we don’t quickly find something solid we can latch onto. The second sentence seems more concrete, although the “banty-bowed” description is a bit obscure (it seems to refer to a rooster’s legs). This sentence also contains a reference to Rhobert’s childhood, which suggests he is an adult now, although we have no way of discerning his true age. There is also the question of the narrator. Whose voice is this? Is it the omniscient voice of Toomer or a more limited narrator closer to Rhobert’s interiority? Either reading seems justifiable. Nebulous moments like this in *Cane* may have been what caused one critic at the time of its publication to deride “certain innovators who conceive language to be little more than a series of ejaculatory spasms” (Whalan 377). However, instead of simply dismissing it as stylistic posturing, we can see this jarring, ambiguous language as mimicking the “blue notes” or microtones of the blues. Like the good blues singer Wald describes above, Toomer slides between these microtones of words creating something that never feels solidly in tune yet still manages to convey some sense of meaning. Finally, it is worth mentioning the repeated phrase “He is way down” since the idiomatic notion of being *down*, meaning to feel bad, is so prevalent in blues lyrics. In “Rhobert,” “way down” can be read as continuing the metaphor that Rhobert is somehow being crushed by a house, but it can also be read in the blues way to mean that Rhobert feels dejected.

According to James H. Cone, rebellion in the blues is not only a musical rebellion but a political one:

[Blues music] is *black* and thus articulates the separateness of the black community. It is an artistic rebellion against the humiliating deadness of western culture. Black music is political because in its rejection of western cultural values, it affirms the political “otherness” of black people.

Through song, a new political consciousness is continuously created, one antithetical to the values of white society. (5-6)

In *Cane*, we can see this come through strongly in “Song of the Son,” one of the pieces that clearly does show Toomer lamenting the disappearing folk culture of the southern black community:

O land and soil, red soil and sweet-gum tree,
 So scant of grass, so profligate of pines,
 Now just before an epoch’s sun declines
 Thy son, in time, I have returned to thee,
 Thy son, I have in time returned to thee.

In time, for though the sun is setting on
 A song-lit race of slaves, it has not set;
 Though late, O soil, it is not too late yet
 To catch thy plaintive soul, leaving, soon gone,
 Leaving, to catch thy plaintive soul soon gone. (16)

Everything about this poem “affirms the political ‘otherness’” of African Americans that Cone describes. Not only is the black race its subject but also its intended audience since much of 1920s white society would be unlikely to sympathize with the disappearing

black folk culture. It also makes an audacious political move in its metaphor of the black race as the “son” of the land, implying that the southern United States belongs, spiritually, to black people. This would certainly constitute “a new political consciousness,” especially in the Jim Crow days of the early twentieth century. Finally, the repetition of the final two lines in each of these verses recalls the repetition in blues lyrics. Along with the very word *song* in the title, this conveys a strong sense of black music coming through in the poem. In every regard, this is a black poem: it speaks to black people, about black people, and in a black musical style, all of which expresses a self-conscious desire to be distinguished from white culture.

Creating a sense of black consciousness or “otherness” directly ties into another important virtue of the blues: the blues are communal. The simplicity of the blues structure makes it extremely easy for musicians to adapt to. There is such a familiarity in the blues—like a universal musical language—that when a group of musicians get together, even if they have never met before, they can spontaneously and successfully collaborate within the blues. When it comes to crafting lyrics, Wald says blues singers draw “on all the sources available to them,” (114) including other singers’ lyrics: “Even the greatest blues songwriters have seen no harm in reworking each other’s phrases. As with hip-hop sampling, the idea is to create something unique and new by a combination of borrowing, reworking, and adding original touches” (116). In these ways, the blues form a community among musicians, but they also form a community with audiences through performance. Barlow says, “Audience participation made blues performance a communal art form. Call and response between artist and audience was common, while kinetic exchanges took place through handclapping and dancing....In the long run, the

collective memories that emerged from these cultural rituals promoted solidarity and cohesion” (327).

In *Cane*, we see this kind of kinetic communion in the way the narrator frequently addresses the reader directly. This often occurs in the poems, such as in “Cotton Song”:

“Come, brother, come. Lets lift it; / Come now, hewit! roll away! / Shackles fall upon the Judgment Day / But lets not wait for it” (13). Here, the narrator passionately encourages the reader to rise up to freedom now rather than wait for the enslavement of Judgment Day. The use of the first person plural (“Lets lift it,” “But lets not wait for it”) contributes to the inclusivity, joining the narrator and reader together. Later in the poem, we get the audience’s response to the narrator’s call: “We aint agwine t wait until th Judgment Day! / Nassur; nassur, / Hump. / Eoho, eoho, roll away! / We aint agwine t wait until th Judgment Day!” (13). Not only are these lines offset from the narrator by the use of quotation marks, the dialect is clearly a different voice, reinforcing the sense that this is an actual audience response rather than an imagined response from the narrator. Phonetic words such as “hump” and “eoho,” like some guttural hollering, create the aural illusion of a large audience shouting their support. This gives the audience’s response a passionate intensity that matches or even exceeds that of the narrator, which creates the feeling that a meaningful communion has been established.

In “Cotton Song,” the audience responds on behalf of the reader, but in some of *Cane*’s other pieces, the address to the reader leaves it for us to decide how to respond. This occurs in “Seventh Street,” where the narrator repeatedly asks the reader, “Who set you flowing?” (41), and particularly in “Fern,” where the narrator pleads with the reader for advice about how to combat his desire for Fern, which he knows will go unrequited:

I ask you, friend...what thoughts would come to you—that is, after you'd finished with the thoughts that leap into men's minds at the sight of a pretty woman who will not deny them; what thoughts would come to you, had you seen her in a quick flash, keen and intuitively, as she sat there on her porch when you train thundered by?...Would you tell your wife or sweetheart about a girl you saw? Your thoughts can help me, and I would like to know. (20)

As opposed to the more fervent tone in “Cotton Song,” where the narrator leads the audience to a shared emotional peak, here the narrator gives control to the reader and asks us to lead the way. This creates community by putting the narrator and reader on equal ground; the narrator implies: *You and I are alike. We share the same concerns and the same desires. We can help one another.* Cone suggests that the blues serve as a meeting place for the shared history of African Americans: “It is impossible to sing the blues or listen to their authentic presentation without recognizing that they belong to a particular community. They were created in the midst of the black struggle for being. And because the blues are an expression of that struggle, they are inseparable from blackness and trouble (111).” In this sense, the blues can provide a kind of support network for African Americans to remind them they are never alone in their troubles. More importantly, the blues can provide a way of sharing the spirit necessary to overcome these troubles.

For Cone, black rebellion in America did not begin with the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s but back in the earliest days of slavery: “It began when the first black person decided that death would be preferable to slavery. If white people could just realize this, then they might be able to understand Malcolm X and other black

revolutionaries” (24). W. E. B. Du Bois speaks similarly about the black attitude toward death: “Of death the Negro showed little fear, but talked of it familiarly and even fondly as simply a crossing of the waters, perhaps—who knows?—back to his ancient forests again” (161). It therefore seems inevitable that we should see this preference for death over suffering appear in the blues, such as Sara Martin’s “Death Sting Me Blues” (“Blues, blues, blues, why did you bring trouble to me? / Oh death, please sting me and take me out of my misery”) or Howlin’ Wolf’s “How Many More Years” (“How many more years have I got to let you dog me around? / I’d soon rather be dead sleeping six feet in the ground”). However, despite the initial impression these examples might give, the blues are far from being nihilistic or defeatist. Instead, what we see at work in these and other seemingly morose or pessimistic songs is more of the irony previously mentioned by Sherley A. Williams and described in even richer detail by Ralph Ellison:

The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one’s aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near comic lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically.

(78-79)

For Ellison, the blues are a form of catharsis, a way of using suffering against itself in order to transcend it. This cathartic approach to music can be seen as yet another form of black rebellion, a way of creating an *otherness* separate from white culture: “In Mozart’s Enlightenment-era Vienna, musicians sought to express beauty through order, balance,

and harmony. In [blues musician] Charley Patton's Jim Crow-era Delta, musicians expressed beauty through pain, dissonance, and irony" (Lawson 11).

In *Cane*, we see this expression of beauty through pain in a poem such as "November Cotton Flower," which describes how, in spite of the cold winter drying up the fields and killing the crops, a single flower manages to bloom at the end: "Old folks were startled, and it soon assumed / Significance. Superstition saw / Something it had never seen before: / Brown eyes that loved without a trace of fear, / Beauty so sudden for that time of year" (8). This cannot be considered a completely happy ending since the majority of the crops, so crucial to a rural economy, are still dead. Practically speaking, therefore, there is still great cause for concern. However, this one small symbol of beauty manages to transcend that and, at least momentarily, relieve the people's fears.

In "Face," Toomer uses curiously somber imagery to describe feminine beauty:

Hair—
 silver-gray,
 like streams of stars,
 Brows—
 recurved canoes
 quivered by the ripples blown by pain,
 Her eyes—
 mist of tears
 condensing on the flesh below
 And her channeled muscles
 are cluster grapes of sorrow

purple in the evening sun
 nearly ripe for worms. (12)

The juxtapositions of a beautiful face with “ripples blown by pain,” “grapes of sorrow,” and the mention of worms, which evokes images of a rotting corpse, creates a paradox: we are forced to perceive beauty as sorrow and sorrow as beauty; Toomer denies us the ability to have one without the other. To see this woman’s face is to know that she is suffering inside, but it is also to know that her suffering cannot suppress her beauty. Once again, we do not have a happy ending but an ending that finds an acceptance of both suffering and beauty.

Fittingly, Toomer saves the most powerful example of catharsis, “Kabnis,” for the end. Kabnis’ problem is not his anger but his inability to transcend it, his inability, in the blues way, of expressing that anger as beauty. “Here,” Robert McKeever says, “is the black artist as educator who can only intellectualize his blues” (455). Unlike Lewis, who can laugh off insults and threats and carry on with his life, Kabnis stewes impotently in his anger and thus can only express anger himself: “Th form that's burned int my soul is some twisted awful thing that crept in from a dream, a godam nightmare, an wont stay still unless I feed it. An it lives on words. Not beautiful words. God Almighty no. Misshapen, split-gut, tortured, twisted words” (109). Words are torturing Kabnis because he cannot find any beautiful words with which to feed his soul. All he can do is tell himself ugly things, which fuels his anger that much more. Until he embraces the notion that there can still be beauty along with suffering—in other words, until he can tell himself something beautiful—he will continue to suffer.

This moment finally comes for Kabnis near the end when, after he ridicules the old man, Carrie “turns him to her and takes his hot cheeks in her firm cool hands. Her palms draw the fever out. With its passing, Kabnis crumples. He sinks to his knees before her, ashamed, exhausted” (114-115). Like the flower that blooms in the dry soil in “November Cotton Flower,” this act of kindness and compassion from Carrie is the one sign of beauty Kabnis has managed to find so far in this ugly world, and it extinguishes his anger in an epiphany where he comes to realize what Lewis already knows, that “a man’s life is not supposed to be a chronicle of personal catastrophe but rather a celebration” (McKeever 457).

Afterwards, “Kabnis” and *Cane* come to a close with the start of the new morning: “The sun arises. Gold-glowing child, it steps into the sky and sends a birth-song slanting down gray dust streets and sleepy windows of the southern town” (115). *Cane*, which begins at dusk in “Karintha,” ends at dawn with a sense of rebirth—a “birth-song” no less. The final two measures of a twelve-bar blues are known as “the turnaround,” after which the music loops back to the first measure for the start of the next verse. The sunrise at the end of “Kabnis” is the turnaround for *Cane*, the end of this verse. The circular structure of the book suggests that the painful and ugly moments described throughout will come again, but in the end we will always return to the sunrise. In spite of its often bleak nature, *Cane* ultimately needs to be seen as a hopeful, optimistic book—not because it ends in beauty but because, like the blues, it teaches us a way of working through suffering. “Blues music,” says Cone, “is music of the black soul, the music of the black psyche renewing itself for living and being” (104). Reading *Cane* is a renewal of the soul, a lesson in how to survive spiritually.

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