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Jean Toomer's *Cane* and How Females are Portrayed

Jean Toomer's *Cane* has many different depictions of women throughout the book. Some examples are in pieces of poetry where the title of that poem is the female protagonist's name. In others pieces, there is imagery of a woman who isn't quite clearly depicted but rather a disembodied entity. The book itself is incredibly misunderstood yet there is something to be said on how Jean Toomer approaches the feminine subject. Through Jean Toomer's use of women in *Cane*, Jean Toomer is able to express ideas of the Negro soul, how the oppression white people changed the female subject and the quick decline in the female awareness. In addition, each woman has a specific "power", if you will, in their stories.

The first of many female oriented pieces Jean Toomer wrote is located in the first section of *Cane*, where the first part of *Cane* is all regarding issues in the rural south. The first piece is titled "Karintha", where Jean Toomer describes a woman who had been constantly objectified for her body and beauty from a young age. She was completely unaware of this growing up, of course, and was described to be "like a black bird that flashes in the light" (Toomer 3), just as

any child with an abundance of energy would be described to be like. She was depicted to be almost invincible to her community on account of her beauty.

She was mischievous; she “stoned the cows, and beat her dog, and fought the other children” yet when those with any sort of power could catch her, they would turn a blind eye for the assumption that she was “innocently lovely” due to her physical beauty (Toomer 4). Even from an early age, Karintha was being corrupted due to her beauty. She was placed in situations where she was forced to become an adult prematurely due to the insensitivity of the men around her. She was raised to believe that she was nothing if she wasn’t incredibly beautiful and open for men to take pleasure in, which is why the killing of her own child occurred.

Near the end of Karintha’s story, Jean Toomer expresses images of the birth of her child. That child wasn’t born of love or acceptance, but the child was rather born “onto a bed of pine-needles in the forest” (Toomer 5). Her story then goes on to insinuate that Karintha placed her newborn into the nearby sawmill and allowed her baby to burn alive. Her guilt can be seen through the idea that “the smoke was so heavy you tasted it in the water” (Toomer 5). Karintha “was a growing thing ripened too soon” for the simple fact of men’s satisfaction. It was through the men within her community that Karintha’s feminine qualities such as fertility were smothered for selfish reasons. This concept can be broadened to the issue of oppression.

In regards to “Karintha”, the oppression of blacks because of white during this time period can also be seen. Like Karintha, blacks were not given the respect or treatment that they deserved. They were forced into the white community’s ideals and expectations. During that

time period, blacks were not able to fully be themselves and have full rights as whites did.

Karintha is similar in that aspect. Karintha was forced into her community's ideals and expectations and was not allowed to be the person she wanted to be but rather the person others wanted her to be. Jean Toomer's use of Karintha to not only express how some women were treated but also the oppression occurring at the time is powerful.

Karintha also had a power; she was a giver and a taker in order to survive. She gave men what they sought, which would be sex in Karintha's case, in exchange for money. No man could permanently have Karintha because this would ruin her purpose. Through this exchange, Karintha had the power "to bring out the altruistic self-sacrifice in men" (Clark 325). Karintha was also a portrayal as the jezebel, where jezebels "have one foot over the line of appropriate sexual behavior and are masculinized because of their sexual aggressiveness" (Goad 32).

The next piece where Jean Toomer uses a woman to describe similar ideas as "Karintha" is called "Becky". Becky, like Karintha, is at the will of the men within her community and portrays the oppression from whites and men alike. Becky had two black sons, which blacks and whites within her community both despised her for because the idea that a black man would sleep with a white woman was disgraceful for both races. They treated Becky as though she was "contaminated and insane" and felt as though "her sexual deviance is intolerable", despite Karintha's promiscuity being endorsed (Goad 34).

The white people would call her a "God-forsaken, insane white shameless wench" (Toomer 8) because there was still such racial tension and segregation going on. In a feeble

attempt to try to ignore what Becky had done, the men in the community built her a shack far away from them. Since both races came together to build Becky that shack and brought her food, it seems as though Becky was seen “as a symbol of a sexual line that cannot be crossed” (Goad 34). They were not obligated to take care of her in any way, yet they did and almost seemed as though they treated her with “offerings” as though she was “a goddess of sorts” (Goad 34). Yet “the house cannot stand forever in denial of Beck’s embodiment”, so the shack eventually falls and ends her life (Goad 34).

Becky had two black sons, which of course was unheard of and Becky knew this. However, she single handedly broke down those barriers and willingly faced the consequences. She was shunned yet still made her mark on the people within her community, despite constantly staying her home near the end. Both of her sons allude to the Biblical reference of Jacob and Esau, where their “birthrights had been stolen by the town who denied them” (Clark 235). Becky, as the towns scapegoat, is eventually vindicated when the chimney of her shack falls as she now is free to have “the sweet consolation of Jesus” (Clark 326).

In the next piece titled “Carma”, Jean Toomer takes a bit of a different approach than that of “Karintha” or “Becky”. She is not sexualized from a young age like Karintha nor did she have a mixed baby. Instead, Carma is painted as a woman with “the primitive richness of the Negro woman” (Cancel 27). Carma defines beauty in every sense of the word due to how raw and natural she is. Even though Carma is married, she does not have a happy marriage. Carma’s husband disregards her and Carma understands that she could easily find someone else.

Carma isn't the modern traditional form of feminine beauty but rather a type of natural beauty. She unapologetically smells "of farmyards" and "does not sing; her body is a song", alluding to the true black woman's beauty during this time period (Toomer 15). Due to her beauty and the state of her marriage, she becomes unfaithful to her husband and he inevitably finds out. Carma's melodrama, through her use of intelligence and wits, eventually allows her to trick her husband by faking her death and gets him sent to jail.

Carma's power is simple: intelligence. Rather than succumbing to the laws of men in regards to being faithful, she did exactly what she wanted and used her wits to outsmart her husband. Her fake death allowed her to transform into her true self and created a "reincarnation of her name" to Karma (Clark 328). She overcame and her actions resulted her to have more sexual freedom without consequences, as her husband went to jail. She becomes "a symbol of uninhibited sexuality whose behaviors lead to men's ruins" (Goad 36).

All three of these women share something in common, which is that the women "stand in the forefront, the men serving only as ploys in the conflicts the women incarnate" (Clark 322). Jean Toomer, rather than focusing on men, decides to play off of the rarely detailed side of the woman. He depicts what she has to endure not just from whites but men of any race. Their actions in all of their individual stories, however, result in "the threshold of awakenings to self-knowledge and wholeness" (Clark 322) in some way, shape or form. Despite this, each woman overcomes the hardships through their own select powers to prevail over injustice.

The next piece pertaining to femininity within *Cane* is titled “Fern”. Unlike “Karintha”, “Becky” or “Karma”, “Fern” is more a short story rather than a poetic piece. Fern’s “mysticism” (Clark 321) can be seen as a form of escape from the pain that she endures. That mysticism causes Fern to become impossible to understand by men. She had a sort of power over them, causing men to feel “bound to her” and “felt as though it would take a lifetime to fulfill an obligation which they could find no name for” (Toomer 21). Fern, unlike the women formerly mentioned, is obviously stronger while the others have a strength that is not as obvious. “She enslaves every man she comes in contact with” (Cancel 27) whereas Jean Toomer expressed the other women to pretty much become tools to men in order to survive.

Fern is a mix of all of the women in this first section of *Cane*; Fern is biracial, she is attractive, she is religious and trapped sexually. Unlike Karintha, Fern’s beauty is not just skin deep. Fern was “somehow above them” and the local men eventually began to “fear that which they cannot understand” (Toomer 22). She had an internal beauty that no man could handle and Fern did not want to be idolized for her beauty, which resulted in her becoming “a virgin” (Toomer 22). Fern returns to her spirituality, blaming herself for why she is the way she is. Jean Toomer portrays Fern as a passive woman; Fern does not do anything to inherently warrant how she is treated or viewed by men.

Jean Toomer paints Fern more as a symbol than a woman. Fern’s “body is seen as the object of men’s frustrated and gratified desires”, as she is unobtainable due to the fact that Fern classifies herself as a virgin (Goad 37). She is seen as a sort of dichotomy; “Fern’s eyes said to

them that she was easy" yet when she refuses to have sex with a man, she is respected and seen as something that the men could never obtain (Toomer 21). Fern is build as an almost "myth of a woman", as no woman in that period could never exist (O'Daniel 391).

When it comes to "Esther", unlike Karintha, is not sought out for her beauty by men at a young age. Instead, Esther grows with an overwhelming maternal instinct despite no man wanting to father a child with her. At the age of nine, Esther falls in love with Lord Barlo, or more so falls in love with the part of Barlo that is publicly shown. Once he returns to town after she has grown up, she learns the true side of Barlo, whom she had loved for so long, and is completely disgusted after discovering "that he consorts with whores" (Cancel 27).

Esther's story also includes this "dominant ideology" called the Other (Goad 40). This ideology represents how Esther should be like other women in terms of her sexual behavior, as her lack of sex in her ideology causes her to be a sort of freak to others within the ideology. Esther is unlike the other females because of this fact and actually portrays how a "sexually withheld woman is a symbol" but a symbol that those within that ideology can understand (Goad 40). Her always wondering why she is unappealing to men yet refuses to engage in sexual activity such as Karintha did, it winds her up seeming useless and lost. Like Fern, Esther is also a sort of myth. She expresses "part of woman that needs myth to survive in an alien and frightening world" (O'Daniel 394).

Moving past stories where the title is the woman's name, "Portrait in Georgia" takes a different approach. This segment is instead portraying a female subject as a fragmented body.

Jean Toomer named off each body part of this fragmented subject while describing that part. However, he doesn't describe these parts lovingly. Rather, Jean Toomer uses these body parts to describe the horrific acts that black people faced; to be specific, Jean Toomer is describing lynching. This fragmented woman portrays violence and false kindness in order to try to appease the white people that oppressed her.

Like "Portrait in Georgia," "Face" follows a similar theme. "Face" portrays another fragmented woman but this woman seemed to be a possible slave. Jean Toomer describes this face as being "weighed down with the effects of life" (Goad 41). The ending statement, "nearly ripe for worms", portrays her willingness for death to take her as she has endured enough in her lifetime. Jean Toomer uses her to bring an understanding how the lifestyle at the time effected black women and even men alike (Toomer 12). This poem is similar to that of Becky, as Becky was equally distraught with the intensity of life due to oppression and the like.

Reading this first section of *Cane* and really focusing on the characters allows the reader to see how they are all intertwined in this chaotic time period. "Karintha" provides a sort of "existential question" whereas Fern is "the statement to that question" (O'Daniel 390). Women such as Fern, Becky, Esther and Karintha were "primitive women" because of how Jean Toomer describes them with allusions to the earth and "because they are a reflection of rural America" during that time period (O'Daniel 397). O'Daniel also brings up a good point that all of these females Jean Toomer talks about "are all the same woman" and "wearing different faces, but each possessing an identifiable aspect of womanhood" (389).

To wrap all of this up, Jean Toomer uses women in a variety of ways. He can use them to portray the pure femininity that all women have or even to portray the unjust violence occurring to these women almost daily during his time period. This can be difficult for one to grasp now, as we were not present for those events to occur and they are so terrible that we could not even imagine the full extent of it. He utilizes these women in many different ways yet still intertwines them all in the end. The first part of his book focuses on the rural south and these women portrayed that type of life there during the time period.

Jean Toomer gifts his readers with something incredible, which is an inside look into where we as a community of American citizens have come from. It is important to change and be better than what we had done, but it is also incredibly important to remember where we came from and the injustices that occurred. Jean Toomer reminds us of that with these in-depth characters and the struggles they had faced while overcoming those issues in their own ways. It resembles the perseverance of black rural women and the strength it took to get to this point we now call the present.

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