

Racial and sexual identity in care



Throughout the text *Cane* by Jean Toomer, the author creates a paradoxical depiction of women because, although he at times criticizes the metonymization of women, he also participates in it. For example, the first half of the book relies almost entirely on the mythologization of various female figures in Southern society. However, the second half of the book gives voice to the female characters, thus allowing for a critique of the male behavior. Similarly, the text expresses a deep nostalgia for the origins of the African American culture, while simultaneously acknowledging a past filled with slavery and oppression. The interaction of these two concepts throughout the text help to articulate the complex issue of racial identity in post-slavery America. An example is the comparison of women to cotton flowers. Each vignette in the text acts as a force reconciling the cognitive dissonance that comes with Toomer's "mourning" of his problematic racial origins, while also exploring his controversial views of women and sexuality. One example where race and gender interact is in the story "Theater."

Since the story is told through the point of view of John, the male gaze is very prevalent in the descriptions of the women—especially in the parentheticals. Throughout the story, John's thoughts interject the descriptions of the scene, and they are mostly of a patronizing nature. He sexualizes the dancers with comments like "Lift your skirts, Baby, and talk to papa!" (Toomer 50) and "Dance and I'll love you!" (Toomer 52). His thoughts while viewing the rehearsal are borderline voyeuristic, as he fetishizes the women in his descriptions: "Soon the director will herd you, my full-lipped, distant beauties, and tame you, and blunt your sharp thrusts in loosely suggestive movements... Soon I... I'd like..." (Toomer 50). John's

obsession with viewing the women—the “distant beauties” (Toomer 50)—from afar is explicative of the text’s ‘mourning’ of racial origin because of his contradictory feelings towards them. Although he desires the women, he does not actually allow himself come close to them for various reasons. This can be seen in his streams of consciousness where he argues with himself, saying, “Touch her... Hell no. Cant be done... it can be done. Get her to herself somewhere, anywhere... Hold em bud, Cant be done. Let her go... And keep her loveliness” (Toomer 52). His obsessive fantasizing of the women, in addition to being inappropriate and borderline threatening, also is showing a clash between his desire and his inability to succumb to that desire. Ultimately, John’s internal conflict represents Toomer’s conflicts about identity on a much smaller scale.

Race and status also plays a role in creating a gap between John and the dancers. While they are all present in a historically African American space—the Howard Theatre, where there are “black-skinned” dancers and “road-shows volley songs into the mass-heart of black people” (Toomer 50)—there is a clear distinction that is made between John and the others. John is referred to as a “Dictie” (Toomer 51), which is a slang term for an upper-class African American person who tends to participate in more traditionally white activities. Dorris also contemplates his social status in relation to her own, when she begins thinking, “Aint I as good as him? Couldnt I have got an educated if I’d wanted one? Dont I know respectable folks... Aint I had men as good as him?” (Toomer 51). Both judge each other based on their perceptions of each other’s class, as John condescendingly thinks, “Christ, but how she’d bore you after the first five minutes” (Toomer 52). Another

problematic comment by John is made when he is describing the upcoming performance and he thinks, “ Soon the audience will paint your dusk faces white, and call you beautiful” (Toomer 50). This thought presents the reader with another contrast in the story, as the entire story is written to the rhythm of jazz music. As a result, the story is shameful of black culture while also taking part in it. By portraying the characters in a judgemental light, while also placing them in an upbeat proudly black setting, Toomer plays with the idea of ‘ mourning’ his racial origins yet again.

Gati’s idea of the “ racial specter” becomes very clear in “ Theater” as Toomer is constantly contradicting himself throughout his writing. His obsession with describing the black woman and the female form clashes with his desire to partake in whiteness in this story, as the main character seems to fall outside of the black-white binary—he is an upper-class “ Dictie,” but he is also the brother of the manager of a black cabaret. John’s sexually charged descriptions of the dancer’s bodies objectify the women in the story, which ultimately makes them symbols for his desire to participate in black culture. Contrarily, his refusal to commit them show his inability to fully realize his culture and his origins. In this way, the story confronts Toomer’s complex understanding of his own racial identity.