

# The absence of female voices and perspectives in Jean Toomer's 'Cane'



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

In his biographical introduction to *Cane*, Darwin Turner quotes William Stanley Braithwaite as saying, “ In Jean Toomer, the author of *Cane*, we come upon the very first artist of the race, who with all an artist’s passion and sympathy for life, its hurts, its sympathies, its desires, its joys, its defeats and strange yearnings, can write about the Negro without the surrender or the compromise of the author’s vision.” This claim of primacy is both lofty and inaccurate, as it completely overlooks the works of previous black authors such as Olaudah Equiano, Phillis Wheatley, and Frederick Douglass, to name a few obvious contenders. After reading and rereading Toomer’s stories and poems, I could find no reason to hail the author as “ the first artist of the race” who could “ write about the Negro without the surrender or compromise of the author’s vision.” The most prominent issue in *Cane* is the overt absence of a female voice. There are numerous female characters and several stories named after them, but the women are presented more as objects for observation than as fully-formed characters. This is a bitter irony: Jean Toomer is celebrated as a literary voice for African American people, yet he does not permit the female half of those people to speak.

The first title character we meet is Karintha, a young girl “ carrying beauty, perfect as dusk when the sun goes down.” Each paragraph in this brief story shows Karintha at a different age, but we never hear her voice. She is described through her relationships and interactions with men. It is through her mock-sexual actions at a young age with a “ small boy who was not afraid to do her bidding” that we are first introduced to her. We are told that she has been “ married many times” and that all the young men “ want to

bring her money”—a possible hint at prostitution. All the same, each of these pieces of information defines Karinthia by her relation to men around her—either as wife or as paid lover.

The second female character to entitle her own story is Becky, “the white woman who had two Negro sons.” We are informed by a local man of how Becky was turned out by white and black society alike, and how her sons were hard, cold, and dangerous. The only sound Becky makes is a possible moan from underneath the ruins of her chimney at the end of the story, but even that is conjecture. Of course, Toomer is relating here the effects of miscegenation and the shunning inflicted by both racial groups; this would be a poignant moment, were Becky not one in a long line of silent women. By itself, “Becky” serves a purpose, but in a book already lacking a legitimate female presence, it just adds to the silence.

The final story named for the main female character it contains is “Avey.” We hear nothing from the title character; instead, she is revealed to us through the musings of a young man who feels he is in love with her. By the end of the story, the two of them have kissed once, and she is lying asleep in the grass as he watches over her protectively. We never hear what Avey wants; we never see her outside of the lens that the narrator provides. She, like the others, is a literary object that shows no personal volition.

Toomer’s poems are no exception to this female absence. Again, when he does give us a glimpse of a female character, it is only as a physical object via physical description. In “Face,” the female character is revealed through descriptions of her hair, brows, eyes, and muscles; in “Evening Song,” Cloine

is an object to be observed as she “ sleeps” and “ dreams,” her “ lips pressed against [the narrator’s] heart;” and in “ Portrait in Georgia,” a description of hair, eyes, lips, breath, and body is all we have of the female character.

One cannot help but to take issue with the lack of a genuine female presence in Cane. As a person of biracial heritage—a term I hate to use because it suggests an inherent differentness based on skin color—Jean Toomer was able to walk in both the black and the white circles. He would have had first-hand knowledge of the prejudices and struggles associated with each, and he would have been subject to ridicule from both sides. This idea makes his omission an even graver literary folly. Was Jean Toomer was a misogynist? No. His portrayal of women is favorable throughout the book, but only in the way that an artist paints his subjects in a favorable light without showing the blemishes and scars. The portrayal is not real, and this lack of truth in the piece is an injustice that cannot be overlooked. If, as Braithwaite suggests, Jean Toomer is the first African American writer to write about the lives of people of color without losing his vision, then it could easily be postulated that Toomer’s vision is no inherently problematic. He seemingly places his female characters on a pedestal, but only to make them easier to objectify.