

Heavy loads: cane and the burden of discrimination



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Jean Toomer, in his novel *Cane*, compiles issues that plague the black community of the United States through the lens of characters who struggle with conflicts that arise because of racism in both the North and the South. These issues include grappling with masculinity, femininity, and gender roles, being biracial and not fitting into one solid community, and having dreams that are out of reach due to the oppressive white power structure in America. One story in particular in *Cane* that exposes the deeply painful effects that racial oppression and violence have on black Americans is Toomer's "Kabnis." Through Kabnis, an educated black male character who feels as if he cannot reach his dreams or rise to his full potential due to racial violence in the South, Jean Toomer sheds light on the consistently oppressive white power system in the United States that does not allow black people to rise to equality, even as they become scholars and artists.

Kabnis' dilemma provides an example to what might—in the words of Langston Hughes—happen "to a dream deferred," as Kabnis begins to lose his wits due to his inability to explore the beauty of the world, which is his true desire. As an educated black man from the North, Kabnis faces a difficult time in the South finding beauty that he longs for in the world. Amongst lynchings and racial oppression in the South, Kabnis is tormented by his desire for beauty and knowledge. He states, "There is a radiant beauty in the night that touches and . . . tortures me . . . What's beauty anyway but ugliness if it hurts you?" (Toomer, 114). Also, Kabnis is biracial, which means he undergoes prejudices from both whites and blacks in the South. Kabnis' inability to fully identify with one racial group makes him an outsider, and causes him to experience both loneliness and extreme

paranoia. While Kabnis is discussing racial violence in his county with two other highly educated black men, someone throws a rock in the window with a note that reads, “ You northern . . . its time fer y t leave. Git along now” (124). Kabnis assumes that the note is from whites, and fears for his life. When he later finds that black people threw the stone, he is astonished and confused. Because slavery, segregation, and racial oppression at the hands of white America has created such a divide between whites and blacks, Kabnis, as a biracial man, is not wanted by whites in the South nor blacks. This dilemma caused Kabnis to feel deeply lonely and frightened.

Kabnis turns to drinking to calm his nerves due to the constant fear he lives in, and the lack of beauty in the world that he longs for and cannot reach. Because Kabnis is found drinking during the day, which is taboo in the South, Kabnis is fired from his teaching job by a black man named Hansby, who believes that the black community must uphold the highest moral standards in order to rise to equality. Hansby represents a black individual with internalized racism, as he is a character who believes that blacks must perform exquisite behavior if they are to be considered equal to whites. In “ Kabnis,” however, Jean Toomer introduces a very old black man who is blind, deaf, a former slave, and reveals a truth about sin in the United States. When the old former slave mumbles the word, “ sin,” Kabnis yells back at him, “ Shut up. What do you know about sin, you old black bastard,” implying that he is fed up with being confronted for committing sins such as drinking during the day (158). But the old man eventually states, “ Th sin whats fixed . . . upon th white folks . . . f tellin Jesus—lies. Oh th sin th white folks’ mitted when they made the Bible lie” (159). Through the words of this

old black man, Toomer exposes the hypocrisy that white people possess for using the Bible to defend slavery, and under Jesus's name—a man whose teachings were supposedly rooted in being kind to all and loving all people—upholding slavery in the name of Christianity. Also, one might take from this old former slave's words that no sin committed by a black man is greater than the enslavement of an entire race, and white people causing such race to live in fear and under constant oppression long after slavery is abolished. Kabnis displays an immense amount of anger and frustration to the old, deaf and blind former slave in the story. Kabnis calls the former slave a dead man, a fool, and states that he doesn't care about the poor man's predicament. Kabnis' behavior can be explained by the fact that if Kabnis cannot find the beauty he desires to see in the world, expand his education, and be at peace, he might end up in the same situation as the former slave.

The reality that an educated black man from northern America feels just as trapped and broken down as a former slave displays that the white power structure in America is refusing to budge—keeping black Americans down and hindering their opportunities with segregation and brutal racial violence. Langston Hughes, in his poem “A Dream Deferred,” asks “What happens to a dream deferred?” Kabnis' deferred dream might cause him to end up in a dark place similar to the predicament of the former slave. All of the characters in Jean Toomer's *Cane* face the consequences of their deferred dreams, some festering like sores, some stinking like rotten meat, but all weighing down like heavy loads on these embattled representations of African Americans.

Works Cited

Toomer, Jean. *Cane*. 1923. New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2011.
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