

# Thematic structures in cane and winesburg, ohio



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“ Life is swift, and the value of life is the value of every moment.” -Waldo Frank

Out of all the readings for this class, this sentiment is expressed strongest in the works of Jean Toomer and Sherwood Anderson. *Cane* and *Winesburg, Ohio* are books of moments, and Toomer and Anderson use universal themes to weave these moments together into sums that are greater than their parts. Toomer uses a cycle of spiritual slumber and awakening, and Anderson uses simplistic narrative forms, a common setting, and a vital prologue and ending to tell parables of idealistic truths and the people that stake their identities to them. The central conflict in *Cane* is the struggle for spiritual identity, and the central conflict in *Winesburg, Ohio* is the inability to communicate and the subsequent failure to combat alienation. Both of these books are about the desire for something that is impossible to attain, and in this regard they share the same spirit.

When Jean Toomer finished *Cane*, he sent a manuscript to Waldo Frank. After reading it, he wrote to Toomer: “ From three angles, *Cane*’s design is a circle...From the point of view of the spiritual entity behind the work, the curve really starts with Bona and Paul (awakening), plunges into ‘ Kabnis’, emerges in ‘ Karintha’ etc. swings upward into ‘ Theatre’ and ‘ Box Seat’, and ends (pauses) in ‘ Harvest Song’.” (Afterword 214) If the form of *Cane* is to be understood, then the curves of this circle must be understood. The cycle of spiritual awakening, slumber, and reawakening is one of the main themes that joins the sections of this book together. Following Frank’s interpretation of this theme, it begins in “ Bona and Paul.” At the end of the story, Paul awakens to the beauty and nature of his racial identity. Ironical that *Cane*

must go to the North to discover that its roots are in the South. Paul returns to tell the doorman at Crimson Gardens that "...the Gardens are like a bed of roses would be at dusk...that white faces are petals of roses. That dark faces are petals of dusk. That I am going out and gather petals." Much of the imagery in *Cane* focuses on dusk. The book starts with an image of dusk. The mixing of light and darkness symbolizes the mixing of races, Caucasian and African into something that is more beautiful than two could be separately. Paul describes it as "something beautiful is going to happen." This is the spiritual awakening to which Frank refers, and it begins the first curve of Cane's circle.

The next curve "plunges into 'Kabnis'". "Plunges into" is an interesting choice of words to describe the movement of the curve. Waldo probably used these words to describe "Kabnis" as going down into Cane's spiritual roots. "Kabnis" is a drama/fiction about confrontation, redemption, and acceptance. The titular character confronts not just his roots, but also his fears. He runs from his responsibility much like Jonah ran from God's commandments. He is eventually redeemed for his fear and accepts his fate, but not without entering the belly of the whale. The story ends in the basement of his redeemer, Halsey. When Kabnis loses his teaching job, Halsey gives him work in his shop. Most of the work is physical in nature, and Kabnis' ineptitude is illustrated when he miserably fails to fit a wooden handle for a hatchet. This ineptitude dives deeper than simply woodwork; it symbolizes the alienation of the Northern African American from his Southern roots. This alienation is the ultimate source of Kabnis' fear and frustration, something with which he must learn to cope.

The end of “Kabnis” is ambiguous as to whether he overcomes this inner conflict. Kabnis listens to Halsey when he calls him and takes the bucket of dead coals upstairs, but he does it with a sour attitude. The dead coals would be an obvious symbol for a dead spirit. However, Kabnis literally emerges from the depths of the basement, so spiritual progress is indicated here. Perhaps Kabnis revived the coals when he went upstairs. According to Frank, “Kabnis” deals with plunging into Cane’s spiritual depths. This ambiguous ending is the reason that Frank refers to it as the bottom curve of the circle because it dives downward in the beginning of the story and begins to rise upward in the end. The curve does not emerge until “Karintha”, which is the first piece of the book. “Karintha” begins the first section of the book, the section that focuses on the landscape and life of the South the most out of the three sections. It is a coming-of-age story about a young girl growing into a beautiful woman. “Karintha” begins with a chorus that repeats at the end. The first line reads: “Her skin is like dusk on the eastern horizon”. Toomer uses the image of dusk to describe beauty, and Karintha is a beautiful woman. Everyone wants her, but no one can have her. Karintha, the woman, represents nostalgia for a past era. The spiritual emergence in the story is apparent when men begin to recognize their desire for Karintha. “Men do not know that the soul of her was a growing thing ripened too soon.” “Karintha” may seem to be a story about physical desire, but it is an allegory for the spiritual emergence that Franks discusses. The desire for Karintha simultaneously creates this spiritual emergence and destroys the foundation on which this spiritual emergence is built. As Toomer writes, it “could be no good for her”, but the desire could not form into anything actual, it could only be actualized. The unattainable desire represents the spiritual

recognition and the inability to unite with the spiritual past, which Toomer perceived to be dying when first visited the South. The spiritual past is recognized, but not before it is too late to actually reach out and unite with it. This discrepancy marks the gap between recognition and actualization, and it is the central conflict in *Cane*. Frank says that the spiritual identity of Cane emerges in “Karintha”, and while signs point in this direction, they are more overt in “Song of the Son”. “Song of the Son” is a celebration of Cane’s spirituality. It recognizes it, it accepts it, and it rejoices in it. It is the apex of the spiritual circle.

Out of all the works in *Cane*, this one feels the closest to Toomer’s true voice. When Toomer writes “Thy son, in time, I have returned to thee” one cannot help but imagine that he is referring to his tenure in the South. Cane may have shown metaphorical and symbolic signs of spiritual emergence in “Karintha”, but it is not until “Song of the Son” that it is openly recognized and embraced. Much like the Prodigal Son, the “Song of the Son” is a story of returning to one’s roots, a story of redemption. The narrator has returned to the South “before an epoch’s sun declines”. He describes the South as “thy son”, which is not just a play on the word “sun”, but also associates the spirituality of Cane with the honor of ancestry. Honoring one’s forefathers is a major component of the spirituality of Cane. Toomer pays homage to them throughout section one, but “Song of the Son” is the crescendo of the spiritual emergence to which Frank refers. This is the part of the book where the curve begins to move upwards.

According to Frank, the curve continues an upward movement in “Theatre” and “Box Seat”. However, “Theatre” and “Box Seat” seem to signal a

downward movement in the circle, indicating alienation or a dark moment in the spirituality that pervades throughout *Cane*. Both of these stories are centered around the lives of middle class African-Americans in the North. They are set among the dance stages and to the jazz music that was popular at the time. There is a general tone of frustration and disconnection between the characters in “Theater” and “Box Seat”. In “Theater”, dancer Dorris tries to connect with John through dance but fails. Once again, desire can only be recognized, not actualized. When she looks at him for approval, she finds “a dead thing in the shadow which is his dream.” Just as men desire after Karintha, Dorris desires after John. Just as men won’t stop vying for Karintha because they do not know that “the soul of her was a growing thing ripened too soon, women will not stop dancing for John’s approval until they see in his face “a dead thing in the shadow which is his dream.” Whereas “Karintha” moves upward in the spiritual circle towards “Song of the Son”, “Theater” moves downward into “Box Seat”.

“Box Seat” opens on Dan Moore stumbling down a residential street, trying to sing an old spiritual. This may seem insignificant in the big picture, but it is perhaps the saddest moment in the book, for it is this moment that signifies the downward movement of *Cane*’s spiritual circle. The voice is considered the most sacred instrument, and songs, especially old gospel spirituals and work songs, represent a strong connection with African-American roots. The fact that Dan can’t use the most sacred instrument represents an isolation so deep it is invisible. On a subconscious level, Dan’s tenacity and aggressive behavior is a projection for his unexplainable feelings of isolation and disassociation. From this perspective, *Cane*’s

spiritual curve appears to point downwards, not swing upwards as according to Frank. In pragmatic terms like quality of life, social class, and economic level, African-American characters that live in the North in *Cane* seem to fare much better than the ones in the South. However, these points are merely superficial compared to the spiritual, but this is exactly the point. The North may have good-paying jobs, nice homes and jazz, but what does it cost? According to Toomer, it costs your spirit.

The downward movement of the curve continues into “Harvest Song”. The reaper says “My pain is sweet. Sweeter than the oats or wheat or corn. It will not bring me knowledge of my hunger.” Dust cakes every stanza. The reapers are returning to the dust from which they came. He recognizes the hunger, but he is grateful to the pain for not giving him knowledge of it. Like Dan and Dorris, the reapers hunger, but they clash with the gap between recognition and actualization. They linger at the nadir of *Cane*’s spiritual circle. It is not until Kabnis emerges from the dusty basement that the curves begins to move upward. From there the circle continues ad infinitum. It continues forever because the nature of the spiritual journey is universal. It happens in the soul of each individual that ever lived. That is what makes *Cane* about more than just the South.

The stories of Winesburg, Ohio revolve around this statement from “The Book of the Grotesques”: “That in the beginning when the world was young there were a great many thoughts but no such thing as a truth. Man made the truths himself and each truth was a composite of a great many vague thought. All about in the world were the truths and they were all beautiful.” Truth plays a central role in the formation of these stories. “The Book of the

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Grotesques” encapsulates all of these stories into a cogent whole. Without that prologue, Winesburg, Ohio would feel more like a collection of loosely related stories than an actual novel. It does feel like a short story collection, but the reader knows that their connections lie deeper than that. “The Book of the Grotesques” lays the framework in which the stories are set. Anderson originally intended to name Winesburg, Ohio the Book of the Grotesques. Just like the characters in these stories, the grotesque hides underneath a layer of normalcy. This is why Winesburg, Ohio is appropriate as a title and “The Book of the Grotesques” as the prologue. The prologue prepares the reader for what comes next and sets a frame of reference. These different narrative forms are painted together in broad, impressionistic strokes. Anderson achieves this through his simplistic yet distinctive prose style, the one that inspired Hemingway. Anderson’s style of prose turns these stories into parables, which form together to give the reader a glimpse into the life of early 20th century Midwestern America.

In “The Book of the Grotesques”, Anderson says “It was the truths that made the people grotesques...the moment one of the people took one of the truths to himself, called it his truth and tried to live his life by it, he became a grotesque and the truth he embraced became a falsehood.” The clinging to truths is what makes the people of Winesburg, Ohio grotesques and thereby forms the stories into a whole book. The truths themselves do not matter as much as the tenacious grip with which the people cling to them. Throughout these stories, people try to connect with the world and fail. They try to communicate that “indefinable hunger” inside themselves but they cannot because of its nature. This inability to communicate is what makes them



ultimately alone, and ironically it is the major theme that connects the stories of Winesburg, Ohio. According to James Mellard, there are “ four rather distinct narrative forms. A form (1) that focuses on a central symbol, (2) that portrays a character type, (3) that delineates a quality, state or ‘ truth’, and (4) that depicts a simple plot development.” (Mellard 1304) Together, these forms flesh out the world of Winesburg, Ohio into something that feels like a real small American town.

Each story is titled according to its narrative form. For instance “ Paper Pills” is an example of a story focusing on a central symbol and according to Irving Howe, it is the central story of the book. Dr. Reefy can be seen as a prescriber of truths that heal the illnesses of Winesburg’s citizens. However, most drugs merely conceal symptoms and do not cure the illness itself. The reader can see how truths can be represented through pills and understand that these pills do not cure illness, but merely hide symptoms. This theme of hiding underneath a layer of normalcy is replete throughout the book.

“ The Teacher” is a story that focuses on a character type, in this case Kate Swift as the teacher. In this story, Kate Swift sees in George Willard potential as a writer and takes an earnest interest in him. She makes multiple attempts to communicate to him what she perceives as truth but fails. After one of these failed attempts, the Reverend Curtis Hartman walks in on a frustrated George alone in his office and proclaims Kate Swift to be “ an instrument of God bearing a message of truth.” Kate may not be “ an instrument of God”, but she has a message she believes important, and try as she may, she can never successfully communicate that message. Many of the “ grotesques” in Winesburg take an interest in George because they see

the potential for the growth of their truths in his own life. They all try to share their truths with him, but fail due to their own shortcomings. Kate's shortcoming is her inappropriate desire to be loved. Every time she tries to talk to George it ends in physical contact followed by frustration with her own inability to make someone else understand her truth, which in turn causes George to feel confused and frustrated. The people of Winesburg are not called "grotesques" because they are physically unattractive; on the contrary, some of them are quite beautiful. It is important to remember that they are described as "grotesques" because they cling to truths, and in their tenacity to live by them, the truths become lies. These truths are indescribable, and that is why they cannot communicate them. The frustration that stems from this inability to communicate leads them to feel utterly alone.

Truth and the inability to communicate it is the central conflict of Winesburg, Ohio. As Anderson mentions in the prologue, there are a great many truths, and loneliness is one of those truths. "Loneliness" is a story that defines this truth through the perspective of its main character. Once again, the main character tries to communicate this truth to George Willard, but fails out of frustration of his own flaw, egotism. Enoch Robinson is unique because he is one of the only residents of Winesburg to venture out into the world. He went to New York City to study art and made many friends, but grew irritated with them because of his own childish demeanor. Enoch is described multiple times as a child. Enoch is satisfied when he is alone with his imaginary friends, but feels animosity towards real people. He is frustrated because

they do not see what he sees. He wants to burst out to them and explain this to them, but he decides that they would never understand.

Enoch's biggest fear is that he cannot express himself, and that is why he is more comfortable alone in his room with imaginary companions rather than real ones. His imaginary companions have no trouble understanding him.

The story becomes ironic when he meets a woman who seems to understand him, but he cannot allow her to completely understand him for fear that he would be "drowned out." The narrator describes Enoch as a "complete egotist", and this is the flaw that prevents him from connecting with George or anyone else. He comes close to connecting with a real person, but his egotism drives him to destroy this relationship. Despite his attempt at self-preservation, "all the life there had been in the room followed her out."

When he tells George the story of the woman, he can hardly bring himself to relive the pain. He shoos George away, but George insists that he finishes the story. He appears to make himself understood to George, one of the only characters to do so, but in spite of the understanding, Enoch still feels loneliness.

Even when the people of Winesburg manage to communicate, they still feel isolation. The narrator states that the "story of Enoch is in fact the story of a room almost more than it is the story of a man." The room represents Enoch's state of mind, which is thrown into perpetual loneliness when the woman draws all of the life and his imaginary friends out of it. Even though Enoch can communicate his state of mind to others, it does not change his loneliness because he holds onto it so tightly that it prevents him from connecting with other people. According to Monica Fludernik, "The central  
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insight in the book concerning human relationships is that each man lives according to his own “truth” and that no one can understand express that truth to someone else. Or, put another way, every human being in this world is ultimately alone.” (Fludernik 525) Every human being in this world is ultimately alone. This is the central insight of Winesburg, Ohio. The book begins with an elderly man at the end of his life who is alone, and it concludes with a young man at the beginning of his life who is alone. “

Departure” marks the end of the book, and it is the most important example of Mellard’s fourth form, one that depicts a plot development. “Departure” is the story of George Willard leaving behind Winesburg for the city, presumably Chicago. Although it is simple and relatively short, it is the most important plot development in the book because it gives the reader a sense of closure and solidifies the collection of stories into a single body.

Many of the characters from the stories arrive at the train station to bid farewell to George, such as Will Henderson and Helen White, who unfortunately arrives too late to see him. The story ends with George looking out the car window. The final clause reads: “the town of Winesburg and his life there had become but a background on which to paint the dreams of his manhood.” Winesburg and all its residents recede from the forefront to become indistinguishable and forgotten like all of the other small American towns. When the reader occupied the town, it felt real and unique, but after reading “Departure”, Winesburg seems like a dream. This is because its characters are not written to represent fully rounded, developing people, but static portraits of “grotesques”, people that cling too tightly to truths and lose their own humanity in the process. These “grotesques”, their desire to

communicate their truths to George Willard, the different types of narrative forms and the town of Winesburg itself join together the collection of stories into a book that feels greater than a collection of loosely connected stories. Winesburg, Ohio and Cane consist of moments in time and space. The methods Anderson and Toomer use to weave these moments into cohesive books preserves them from aging into the forgotten void. They are unique in their own ways, but they both show the reader lives and worlds that can never be seen again. Cane and Winesburg, Ohio implement universal themes to build the lives and worlds inside of them, and that is why we still read them today.

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