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*Cleveland State University*

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THE OBJECTIFICATION OF WOMEN IN CANE

CLAUDIA M. DAVIS

Bachelor of Arts in English

The Ohio State University

December 2008

submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements for the  
degree

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at the

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We hereby approve thesis

of

Claudia M. Davis

Candidate for the Master of Arts in English Degree

This thesis has been approved

For the Department of

English

and

CLEVELAND STATE UNIVERSITY

College of Graduate Studies by

Professor James Marino

---

Department of English

Professor Frederick Karem

---

Department of English

Professor Jennifer Jeffers

---

Department of English

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# THE OBJECTIFICATION OF WOMEN IN CANE

CLAUDIA M. DAVIS

## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis examines Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923) from a feminist perspective. Using Laura Mulvey's film theory of the "male gaze", it repurposes it and uses the theory from a literary standpoint.

Throughout this thesis, many different aspects are examined including the character interaction within the stories, the use of the narrative "I" and its overarching implications, audience participation with regard to voyeurism and Toomer's paradoxical stance on the objectification of women. Toomer writes about the women in *Cane* in a sexually explicit fashion, but does so in order to draw attention to the gaze and criticize it. As the vignettes in *Cane* progress, the women—some complacent with the gaze, others even participants—gain agency and the ability to return the male gaze, culminating in a possible relationship between Kabnis and Carrie K., a relationship of equals.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Much of *Cane* has been reviewed and critiqued since its publication in 1923. Most reviews and discussions have revolved around the issues of black versus white, North versus South, and content structure. It is rather surprising, the lack of feminist review, considering the number of times the issue is raised in the text, but there may be a few explanations.

One reason for the lack of feminist critique could be that many of the examples of male and female relationships in *Cane* often also cross race lines, e.g. "Becky" and "Bona and Paul". It could be that race was thought of as a larger issue than that of feminist power, or the lack thereof. Race has always been a more present and debated

issue than that of feminist equality, so it makes sense to a point that the text was examined more for its racial content; this discussion is examined in Margaret Wright-Cleveland's "Cane and In Our Time: A Literary Conversation about Race" and Werner Sollars' "Jean Toomer's Cane: Modernism and Race in Interwar America", as well as many others. In conjunction with the issue of race comes the subject of North versus South. Toomer examines the interactions of Southerners in the South, Southerners in the North, Northerners in the North, and Northerners in the South. In "Jean Toomer's Eternal South", William M. Ramsey juxtaposes Toomer's view of the South as an outsider (having been raised in D.C.) with his view of the South through the lens of his cultural heritage. This subject matter obviously goes hand-in-hand with the race issues, so it is heavily discussed as well.

Another possibility is that Toomer's content was sometimes set aside in order to examine the structure of his modern prose. Toomer wrote in a structure that was new and different, and this deserved just as much examination as the content of his work. He wrote short stories, but also had interjections of verse. Additionally, some of his stories begin and end with a stanza of poetry. Were these

to be read with the story, or did they exist outside of it? This new structure deserved a thorough examination and received it through works such as Geneviève Fabre's "Dramatic and Musical structures in 'Harvest Song' and 'Kabnis': Toomer's *Cane* and the Harlem Renaissance" and Maria Isabel Caldeira's "Jean Toomer's *Cane*: The Anxiety of the Modern Artist", as well as others.

It may also be that when the 2<sup>nd</sup> Feminist Wave occurred in the late 1960's, the book was still looked to as more of a tool with regard to Civil Rights rather than Feminism. It is definitely worth a look to view *Cane* through a feminist lens, and Mulvey's theory of the 'male gaze' is the perfect feminist frame with which to do it.

It must be acknowledged that Toomer intended a certain amount of participation in "the gaze" from the audience. *Cane* was published in the 1920's and as such, was considered highly erotic for its time. The book was intended for the enjoyment of the spectacle as a whole, so it can definitely be described as complicit with regard to the male gaze, but at the same time, there is a criticism of it within each individual story.

It is obvious that Toomer is trying to draw attention to the negative effects of the objectification of women; in



order to do so he must first objectify said women. In "Karintha", he comments on how the men are sexualizing the titular character at too young of an age, ostensibly rebuking these men (and thus rebuking any who would do the same). Toomer has embedded a criticism of the male gaze by creating the narrative "I" as a man who seems to believe he is better than other men within the prose. It also must be noted that the "I" never stops gazing, so really, the narrator is no better than the others. The narrator represents the reader, who is watching men that are watching women and address the objectification, but in so doing, is still gazing at the women. It is a paradox in that Toomer must first objectify the women (through the narrator) in order to then tear down and criticize the gaze.

The women in Jean Toomer's *Cane* are objectified to the point that they become damaged. Karintha and Becky are thought of only as sexual objects and become pregnant. Both of their stories end in death. Carma and Esther are unable to function because the men with whom they are connected are not present. Louisa, Fern, and Avey are all viewed as a challenge and the winner gets them as a prize. Dorris, Muriel, and Bona are more willing participants in

their own objectification, even encouraging it in certain cases, but they still have little say in their relationships. These instruments of objectification are displayed mainly through Laura Mulvey's theory of the "male gaze". And though Jean Toomer is clearly trying to subvert this objectification of women, in doing so, he must (paradoxically) objectify the women first. Each of these women is objectified by the men in *Cane* because they feel things--religion, passion, lust, love--too deeply and the men cannot understand or connect to that and in the men's pursuit of that connection, the women are left broken and destroyed.

Laura Mulvey's article, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", investigates and dissects the male gaze in film, but that is not the only medium in which her argument is present or relevant. Mulvey states:

There are three different looks associated with cinema: that of the camera as it records the pro-filmic event, that of the audience as it watches the final product, and that of the characters at each other within the screen illusion. (843)

Using this as a model, the analysis of the male gaze in a book can be seen thusly: the author would be the camera (just as the camera captures specific images, so too does the author), the reader and the audience are synonymous as

they both view the finished product, and character interaction is the same in literature as it is in film. Mulvey even says that "none of these interacting layers is intrinsic to film" (843). While using the male gaze as an analytical theory, the use of the narrative 'I' must be taken into account. The narrative 'I' works on multiple levels. On one hand, the narrator is a character interacting within the story, and therefore works as character interaction. Another way to dissect the role of 'I' is to view it as the author speaking personally and giving his opinion. And finally, as the audience, we can insert ourselves as the narrative 'I', coming full circle with the role of 'I' fulfilling all three of the gazes described in Mulvey's article. So using this modified theory, *Cane* can be analyzed for feminist subtext and objectification using the 'male gaze'.

Using the 'male gaze' for analysis, the recurring scenarios in *Cane* become apparent. One of these themes is the incidental destruction of beauty, which can be found in 'Karintha' and 'Becky'; this is also distilled in the poems 'Face' and 'Portrait in Georgia'. The slow decent into madness and uncertainty due to loss and marginalization is depicted in both Carma and Esther's stories. 'Blood-

Burning Moon', 'Fern' and 'Avey' all illustrate the destruction that is wrought in the face of competition. Dorris, Muriel and Bona are all active participants in their own objectification, and as such, have more power in their relationships, however marginal it may be. It also must be noted, with the exception of 'Blood-Burning Moon', all of the stories that take place during the first Southern section are titled after the names of the women in the stories. This is rather ironic considering these women are marginalized in every story. So while obviously being central to their stories, the women are pushed to the side by both the characters and/or narrator. This marginalization stops with the move from the South to the North, along with the women being the titular characters. There are two scenes that take place within the theater that show how the 'gaze' can be destructive to the men as well as the women.

Mulvey maintains that man controls, not only the 'film phantasy', but also gains the power by being the 'bearer of the look of the spectator'. Man gains this power by:

[T]ransferring [the look] behind the screen to neutralize the extra-diegetic tendencies represented by woman as spectacle. [...] As the spectator identifies with the main male protagonist, he projects his look onto that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that the power

of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence.

-Mulvey, 838

This portion of the theory is best exemplified, from a literary stance, when the story is told in the first person. Both "Avey" and "Fern" are told from the perspective of a man and therefore literally placing the reader within the character's mind, much like the spectator does with his male screen surrogate.

While discussing the 'gaze', Mulvey also delves into scopophilia. Scopophilia, Greek for "love of looking", is deriving pleasure from looking, and when taken to its extreme, becomes voyeurism. Scopophilia within a literary text is essentially active, just as it is represented within Mulvey's analysis of film. She discusses how film preys on the audience's "voyeuristic phantasy" (836), giving them an 'inside look at a private world'. The same can be said of literature, particularly when the narrative is in the first person and the reader is given insight into the character's thoughts and feelings. The reader is given the illusion that they have additional knowledge to which no one else is privy, though this is negated by the fact that the book was purposely written in this fashion. It is

written with the hope that the reader will become completely immersed within the text. This too is commonplace within film.

[T]he cinema has structures of fascination strong enough to allow temporary loss of ego while simultaneously reinforcing the ego. The sense of forgetting the world as the ego has subsequently come to perceive it (I forget who I am and where I was) is nostalgically reminiscent of that pre-subjective moment of image recognition.

-Mulvey, 836

There are two different sides to scopophilia, one being the voyeuristic glimpse into another world, the other being identification with the subject of that world. In continuing with the first instance of scopophilia, there are additional examples within the narrative itself, between the characters, so much so that it tends more towards its perversion, voyeurism.

In 1989, Mulvey wrote a response to her original text, "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' Inspired by King Vidor's *Duel in the Sun* (1946)". This article posits some very interesting ideas regarding melodramatic texts with a heroine instead of a hero. Mulvey investigates what happens when a woman is the main character in a text. She states, "I am concentrating on films [texts] in which a woman central protagonist is shown

to be unable to achieve a stable sexual identity, torn between the deep blue sea of passive femininity and the devil of regressive masculinity" (30). While this view is very intriguing, unfortunately it would only apply to three of the stories in *Cane* as the rest are all told from the male perspective, therefore leaving the 'male gaze' as the best analytical tool for *Cane* when referring to Mulvey's work.

## CHAPTER II

### KARINTHA, BECKY AND THE DESTRUCTION OF BEAUTY

Both Karinthia and Becky have been ruined by sex and being sexually objectified. Karinthia has been sexualized from a very young age. "Men had always wanted her, this Karinthia, even as a child, Karinthia carrying beauty, perfect as dusk when the sun goes down" (Toomer, 1). She loses her innocence while home one night when she hears her parents having sex. After this event, she quickly becomes a woman and eventually a prostitute, bearing and burning her child in the woods.

In "Male and Female Interrelationships in Toomer's Cane", Rafael Cancel says, "The story emphasizes the corruption of the female beauty, the desecration of a young, premature female soul by male insensitivity" (26).



Had Karinthas' innocence been nurtured instead, perhaps she would have grown to be a beautiful young lady, married with children, instead of a prostitute, forced to burn her own child in the forest. This point is hinted at by the narrator in the story, "men do not know that the soul of her was a growing thing ripened too soon" (Toomer, 2). The narrator is showing the destruction that the male gaze and objectification of a young girl can do, but in order to show that destruction, he must first objectify her. The narrator has a problematic gaze, in that he seems to be passing judgment on the men that have sexualized Karinthas, yet he does this as well, making him no better. Karinthas has passion as a child, but that passion is turned to sexual passion too soon, and like fruit that ripens too soon, she too has become rotten.

Becky is also ruined in much the same manner. It is not stated at what point she becomes sexualized, but it is clear that the mistreatment drives her crazy. She is shunned by not only the white people, but the black people too, and is forced to live between the railroad and the road on the outskirts of town. She has two sons with a black man, or men, as it is not made clear who fathered her children. She has been ruined by sex. She is a white

woman, but it is her half black children that make her an outsider. Had she not had sex, she would not be an outcast. The black and white men of the town built a shack for her and occasionally stop by to give her food, but they only do this out of guilt. All that they had to do was accept her, even though she would not name the father of her babies, and she probably would not have gone crazy. Just like with Karintha, it is her exposure to men and sex that lead to her ultimate ruin.

It must also be noted that Becky is religious. She is described as a "poor Catholic poor-white crazy woman" (Toomer, 5). There are also odd insertions of Becky singing hymns about Jesus. Since she has been ruined by the men of the town, the only "man" that she can still trust in is God. She has a passion for spirituality as that is all she has left. Her story begins and ends with the same phrase:

Becky was the white woman who had two Negro sons.  
She's dead; they've gone away. The pines whisper  
to Jesus. The Bible flaps its leaves with an  
aimless rustle on her mound.

-Toomer, 5 and 7

Her story is book-ended with quotes about her death and religion. Barlo throws the Bible on top of the heap that

was once her home, under which she is now buried. He tosses it on there as if it is an afterthought.

It seems that the men do not understand her attachment to her religion, even after everything that she has gone through. Ironically, it is on the ride home from church that the narrator and his friend Barlo witness Becky's chimney collapse. Even though the narrator believes he hears her groan under the pile of bricks, they do not run to aide her in any way; all that they do is throw a Bible on top of what will become her grave. The narrator's views, and therefore his gaze, are undercut by Toomer's ironized portrayal, making him an unreliable narrator. Toomer satirizes the church-going narrator, showing that if he were truly a good man, he would have tried to help her, as opposed to racing home to tell his story to the rest of the town.

Just like with Carrie K. in "Kabnis", Becky has a connection with God that the men do not seem to have. The burning of the Bible could signify their inability to connect with God. Without Becky, the men may feel that they have lost their link to Him and so they decide to burn what is left of their connection to God.

Additionally, her 'grave' is referred to as a mound. Scholar Jennifer Williams states that, "the doubling of the mound -as grave pile and as the rise of the female genital area -conflates Becky's sexuality and death" (95). Even in death she is still being objectified and discussed in a sexual context.

This destruction is not apparent in just the stories, but is clearly shown in a distilled form in the poetry interspersed throughout the book. The poem "Face" goes so far as to objectify a woman in her old age and on the cusp of death. It describes an old woman's face and compares and contrasts the pain and sorrow she has suffered with her beauty. The description of the woman's face uses the convention of a panning camera style. It shows her face by focusing on one feature at a time and "panning" down. "Face" combines beauty and objectification with death and destruction, much like another poem in *Cane*, 'Portrait in Georgia'.

'Portrait of Georgia' depicts a white Southern belle, while also showing the lynching of a black man. These poems juxtapose the beauty of women with death and destruction. This is seen in all the stories throughout

the first Southern section in *Cane*; the objectification of the women ends in destruction and ruination.

## CHAPTER III

### CARMA, ESTHER AND ILLUSION VS. REALITY

Both Karintha and Becky are used by men and as such become broken. Carma and Esther are waiting on men and break at their eventual return, though in vastly different ways. Carma has an affair while her husband is away on business and then feigns suicide upon his return out of fear of his rage. To Carma, this must have seemed like her only viable option besides actually committing suicide. She was a lustful and passionate woman that was ignored by her husband. Her only escape was to feign insanity, which in a sense forced her to lose her identity. She had to become someone else entirely to get away from Bane. This is the first instance in *Cane* where a woman actually fights back against her oppressor.

Since Carma was able to escape her husband, it begs the question, how is she being objectified if he is not around? This is one of the instances in which Mulvey's theory of the male gaze is clearly portrayed. This entire story is recounted by the same narrator that told Becky's story. The entire first paragraph is the narrator's description of Carma:

Carma, in overalls, and strong as any man, stands behind the old brown mule, driving the wagon home. It bumps, and groans, and shakes as it crosses the railroad track. She, riding it easy. I leave the men around the stove to follow her with my eyes down the red dust road. Nigger woman driving a Georgia chariot down an old dust road. Dixie Pike is what they call it. Maybe she feels my gaze, perhaps she expects it. Anyway, she turns. The sun, which has been slanting over her shoulder, shoots primitive rockets into her mangrove-gloomed, yellow flower face.

-Toomer, 10

This opening illustrates Carma's power to attract. Williams says of this, "this speculative narrator - who trails Carma with his eyes as she rides down the road can only interpret Carma's story; he cannot accurately represent her" (92-93). She is still being objectified, only this time it is not by the man in her life, but rather the narrator. It must also be acknowledged that since the narrator is a man, the gaze is doubled as he becomes the

"bearer of the look". The reader then identifies with the narrator and assumes his gaze, and with it, all of the subsequent power with which it is associated.

The entire reason the narrator tells this story is not to shed light on Carma's life, but why her husband is on the chain gang and that it is her fault. "Carma's tale is the crudest melodrama. Her husband's in the gang. And its her fault he got there" (Toomer, 11). The subsequent story does not tell why Carma is having affairs, or why she wants to get away from her husband. There is no insight into Carma's life past that she is incredibly strong and faked her own death. (Rather ironically, the narrator describes Carma as strong on multiple occasions, but then denies her any power or agency by telling her story for her, implying that the narrator is just as flawed as the other men within the narrative.) It can be inferred that she faked her death because her husband is a bad person, or at the very least ignores her and her needs. Perhaps she concocted this entire plan, pretending to be crazy, and acting like she shot herself, all in the hopes that it would make her husband so angry that he would kill another man and be gone from her life. But since the story is told from a male



perspective and the power of narration is taken from Carma, the answers will always be elusive.

While Carma may not have had a true break with reality, it is quite obvious that by the time Esther's story is over, she has. Esther is the daughter of the richest black man in her town. As a young girl she becomes smitten to the point of obsession with a visionary known by the name of King Barlo. She waits for him to come back to town, and while waiting for him, has given up on any other man in her town. Unlike the previous stories, Esther is not even noticed by a man until the end. In fact, she is the one fantasizing about Barlo.

When Esther is twenty-seven, Barlo comes back to town. Esther has been running on 'auto-pilot' for a long time; she "sells lard and snuff and flour to vague black faces that drift in her store and ask for them. Her eyes hardly see the people to whom she gives change. Her body is lean and beaten. She rests listlessly against the counter, too weary to sit down" (Toomer, 23). She is not much more than a shell of a person at this point. She feels there is no reason to try at anything if Barlo is not there. Upon his return she is completely rejuvenated. She is so excited that she goes to meet him at the house where he is staying

a little after midnight. When she gets there she tells him that she is there for him. It is not till their eyes meet that she truly sees who and what he is.

She sees a smile, ugly and repulsive to her, working upward through thick licker fumes. Barlo seems hideous. The thought comes suddenly, that conception with a drunken man must be a mighty sin. She draws away, frozen. Like a somnambulist she wheels around and walks stiffly to the stairs.

-Toomer, 25

Esther comes to the quick realization that Barlo is not the man that she thought he was. When she sees what kind of man he truly is, her world implodes.

Now Barlo cannot be solely to blame for this entire situation. He had no idea who Esther was as a child when she began her obsession. Her zombie-like state throughout her teenage years and early twenties is nobody's fault, but her own. She does not have a relationship with anyone else due to the twisted notion that she and Barlo are perfect for one another. Esther is looking for romance and a life together. She believes that since Barlo has visions and hears Jesus that he is inherently a good man. It is this delusion that leads to her obsession. When she comes to Barlo on the night of his return, she tells him that she is there for him. He tells her that she should not be there.

She says that she knows this, but that she is still there for him. She means that she is there for him to have a life with and be with. He believes that she is there merely for sexual satisfaction. While it is obvious that she is alright with objectifying herself because it gave her a sense of control; it is Barlo's subsequent objectification that breaks her. This sexual objectification completely shatters Esther's world.

## CHAPTER IV

### LOUISA, FERN AND AVEY: CONTROLLING THE FANTASY

Fantasizing is an integral part of Toomer's stories, though mainly it is the men that fantasize, and they do so to a point that they convince themselves of their ownership of the women in their lives. At this stage, fantasy has devolved into insanity. This madness and belief of ownership leads to truly unhealthy competition over Louisa, Fern and Avey.

In "Blood-Burning Moon", Louisa is a black maid and there are two men, Bob and Tom, that claim they are in love with her.

Both Bob and Tom are competing for Louisa. The competition has become so intense that it is destructive to Louisa's mind.

A strange stir was in her. Indolently, she tried to fix upon Bob or Tom as the cause of it. To meet Bob in the canebrake, as she was going to do an hour or so later, was nothing new. And Tom's proposal which she felt on its way to her could be indefinitely put off. Separately, there was no unusual significance to either one. But for some reason, they jumbled when her eyes gazed vacantly at the rising moon. And from the jumble came the stir that was strangely within her. Her lips trembled. The slow rhythm of her song grew agitant and restless.

-Toomer, 28

The competition between the men is tearing at Louisa in such a way that she is confusing her suitors. It is this competition and objectification that have begun Louisa's plummet into madness. Eventually this competition turns violent and leads to the death of not just one, but both men and Louisa's subsequent descent into madness.

While the male gaze is obviously destructive for the women in *Cane*, it can also rebound and destroy the men as well. In fact, at one point, Bob can feel the gaze being focused on him.

Fellows about town we all right, but how about his friends up North? He could see them incredible, repulsed. They didn't know. The thought first made him laugh. Then, with their eyes still upon him, he began to feel embarrassed. He felt the need of explaining things to them. Explain hell. They wouldn't understand, and moreover, who ever heard of a Southerner getting on his knees to any Yankee, or anyone. No sir.

-Toomer, 31

Bob feels the power and judgment of the gaze, but is able to brush it aside. Except, in the end, that fear of judgment was still what triggered his downfall. Had Bob not been trying to see Louisa secretly, he and Tom would not have fought, been killed, and driven Louisa crazy. If it is assumed that Louisa did actually lose her sanity, it must have been caused by the men who fought over her without asking her opinion on the matter.

The horror is more than Louisa can bear. The fear, the injustice, the evil, and the finality are more than she can comprehend, and she loses her mind. Her powerlessness and the consequences of her naiveté become for a moment clear to her and exact a price - her sanity. Like Esther, Louisa withdraws to a world beyond the real, where she can no longer be wounded.

-Chase, 397

She had two men that she was involved with and passionate about, but their objectification of her into a prize to be won lead to their deaths and now she is alone and broken. What is rather ironic is, while Louisa is clearly the central character that the story and men revolve around, she is also completely marginalized. Her opinion and feelings are not asked by either man, nor are they really explored in the story. So not only do Tom and Bob

essentially ignore her, believing her to be a mere prize, but even the narrative, and therefore the reader, also dismiss her.

Fern is another woman who is seen merely as a goal, a prize. She is desired by every black man. She sleeps with these men, but they want more from her. They want to understand her, but they cannot. Her eyes tell a story and they want to know and understand it.

Men saw her eyes and fooled themselves. Fern's eyes said to them that she was easy. When she was young, a few men took her, but got no joy from it. And then, once done, they felt bound to her (quite unlike their hit and run with other girls), felt as though it would take them a lifetime to fulfill an obligation which they could find no name for. They became attached to her, and hungered after finding the barest trace of what she might desire. As she grew up, new men who came to town felt as almost everyone did who ever saw her: that they would not be denied. Men were everlastingly bringing her their bodies.

-Toomer, 14

There is something more to her, something beyond what the men can see and they want to have a part of it. At first the men believe that if they sleep with her they will come to understand her, but that is not the case. The men begin to daydream about the day that she will try to marry someone and they will stand up and take her away from that

man because he is not good enough for her. They want to save her, but they do not know her.

Since the men do not understand her, they think the only way they will connect with her is if they possess her. They even go so far as talking about kicking the narrator out of town because they do not like that he is trying to connect with Fern. They do not like the added competition.

There was talk about her fainting with me in the canefield. And I got one or two ugly looks from town men who'd set themselves up to protect her. In fact, there was talk of making me leave town. But they never did. They kept a watch-out for me, though. Shortly after, I came back North.

-Toomer, 17

At the end of the story, Fern is alone and left waiting, but for what, nobody knows. In a sense, she is virginal because she has never really given her whole self over to anyone. Unlike Karantha, who was also sexualized at a very early age, she never gets pregnant. There is always that little piece that she keeps to herself. In "Stillborns, Orphans, and Self-Proclaimed Virgins: Packaging and Policing Rural Women of Cane", Jessica Hays Baldanzi argues:

Rather than passing her well-amalgamated blood on to a new generation, she "became a virgin" in the eyes of the men in her town; thus, in contrast to



Karintha, Fern chooses sexual absence over the sexual excess traditionally slapped on attractive African American women.

-Paragraph 25

So even though she is quite obviously not a virgin, she is virginal in that there is still a part of her that no man has ever, nor will ever, reach. Additionally, this is another case in which the gaze rebounds on the men, just like in 'Blood-Burning Moon'. In this case, the narrator is driven from town by the townsfolk, showing the gaze's true destructive power.

This is also another instance in which the "bearer of the look" appears, as well as the destructive power of the gaze. The narrator begins the story by openly describing and objectifying the main female character. The reader once again obtains the narrator's gaze and assumes that power along with a sense of omniscience.

Face flowed into her eyes. Flowed in soft cream foam and plaintive ripples, in such a way that wherever you glance may momentarily have rested, it immediately thereafter wavered in the direction of her eyes. The soft suggestion of down slightly darkened, like the shadow of a bird's wing might, the creamy brown color of her upper lip. Why, after noticing it, you sought her eyes, I cannot tell you. Her nose was aquiline, Semetic. If you have heard a Jewish cantor sing, if he has touched you and made your own sorrow seem trivial when compared with his, you will know my feeling when I follow the curve

of her profile, like mobile rivers, to their common delta. They were strange eyes.

-Toomer, 14

This description of Fern on the part of the narrator is ostensibly the same as a camera panning up and down a woman's body in a film. In this regard, the power of the gaze is being obtained by both the narrator and the reader as they have become the camera and the audience as described by Mulvey in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (843).

Additionally, the narrator is quite odd in that he addresses the reader multiple times and implies that he and the reader are the same—educated, better. At the end of his tale, he even goes as far as to offer Fern up as a challenge to the reader, "And, friend, you? She is still living, I have reason to know. Her name, against the chance that you might happen down that way, is Fernie May Rosen" (Toomer, 17). Toomer has embedded this critique of the narrator, showing that he is clearly lacking. The narrator believes that he is smarter and on the same level as the reader, but the reader knows that the narrator is, in fact, on the same level as the other men and is just presenting an air of superiority, thus creating a rather 'meta' critique.

Unlike Carma and Esther, Fern takes a more active approach. Instead of running, she returns the gaze. In returning the male gaze, Fern is able to regain some control and not allow herself to be completely overtaken by objectification. In a way, she has become a shell of a person, there in body, but no longer present in mind or spirit. She has been used by so many men and considered a challenge, that she is not an active participant in life because men do not understand her and are unable to connect with her. She is beyond them, and as such is only present in body, making her only half a person.

Avey is another example of a woman in *Cane* that is merely a prize. Once again, just like with Carma, the leading lady's story is told from the point-of-view of a male narrator. She is objectified by the narrator and his group of friends. These boys do not know Avey. They follow her and lust after her, but she is only a sexual object to them. She has a boyfriend, or at the very least someone with whom she is involved. She has passion and lust, but the boys do not see her as a real person, only something that they want.

As time passes, the narrator becomes, somewhat, involved with Avey, though he finally comes to realize that Avey will never be interested in him sexually.

And then I began to wonder why her hand not once returned a single pressure. My old-time feeling about her laziness came back. I spoke sharply. My policeman friend passes by. I said hello to him. As he went away, I began to visualize certain possibilities. An immediate and urgent passion swept over me. Then I looked at Avey. Her heavy eyes were closed. Her breathing was as faint and regular as a child's slumber. My passion died.

-Toomer, 46

The narrator began to fantasize about his future with Avey again, only to turn and see that she had fallen asleep. Avey's eyes are described as heavy, like it is too much work for her to return the narrator's gaze. At this point, she can't even keep them open anymore, and essentially has given up the fight. It is only after the narrator looks at Avey, that he finally sees her.

After this incident, the narrator has decided, since Avey does not return his affections, that she is lackadaisical.

As time went on, her indifference to things began to pique me; I was ambitious. I left the Ferry earlier than she did. I was going off to college. The more I thought of it, the more I resented, yes, hell, that's what it was, her

downright laziness. Sloppy indolence. There was no reason for a healthy girl taking life so easy. Hell! she was no better than a cow.

-Toomer, 44

Just because Avey does not like him and he does not understand why, the narrator has decided to write her off. She is lazy and a cow. The narrator has decided that he is better than her and that she is not good enough. Had she returned his affections he would not have felt the same. The narrator says, "I itched to break through her tenderness to passion. I wanted her to take me in her arms as I knew she had that college feller. I wanted her to love me passionately as she did him" (Toomer, 43- 44). Her absent passion for him is unintelligible to the narrator. He does not understand why she has no deeper feelings for him. This is yet another instance in which Toomer has written the narrator as someone that believes he is superior to the other characters in the narrative, but instead comes across to the reader as arrogant and conceited, thus injecting an unspoken criticism of everything the narrator says and does, including his destructive gaze.

As the story ends, the narrator's passion for Avey dies and he refers to her as "orphan-woman..." (Toomer, 47).

She has never married and is truly alone now that he has left her. The narrator could not deal with being just friends, and as such, she is abandoned and left alone and 'orphaned'. In the end, because she did not give herself over to someone she did not love, she is abandoned.

## CHAPTER V

### DORRIS, MURIEL, BONA AND THE NORTH: THE PARTICIPATION OF OBJECTIFICATION

Louisa, Fern and Avey were all sexualized objects to men and had no say in any of their relationships because of that. But with a geographical transition from the South to the North, the same cannot be said of Dorris, Muriel and Bona. In fact, it can be argued that the only true sexual union that takes place in *Cane* is in the poem "Her Lips Are Copper Wire".

"Her Lips Are a Copper Wire" differs from the ones in the South in that it discusses modern technology as well as an actual forming of a relationship; the two are combined and the end result is pure light. In the North, the passion and heat are more easily controlled, and with that, allow a greater chance of success in the realm of relationships.

So while these women have more control, like the copper wire with its protective cover, they can also be volatile if left open and exposed, so they must protect themselves until the right man comes along, lest they harm themselves or others.

Additionally, in the Northern section, each woman is a willing participant in their own objectification, some even going as far as to encourage it, in the hopes of finding "Mr. Right". Dorris is one such person. In "Theater", Dorris is a dancer and John is the brother of the manager of the aforementioned theater. John is watching all of the dancers at rehearsal and has become enamored with Dorris. Her story is all about looking and being looked at.

John sees the front row: dancing ponies. The rest are in shadow. The leading lady fits loosely in the front. Lacklife, monotonous. "One, two, three-" Music starts. The song is somewhere where it will not strain the leading lady's throat. The dance is somewhere where it will not strain the girls. Above the staleness, one dancer throws herself into it. Dorris. John sees her. Her hair, crisp curled, is bobbed. Bushy, black hair bobbing about her lemon-colored face. Her lips are curiously full, and very red. Her limbs in silk purple stockings are lovely. John feels them. Desires her. Holds off. [...]

Dorris sees John and knows that he is looking at her. Her own glowing is too rich a thing to let her feel the slimness of his diluted passion.

-Toomer, 51



John looks at and objectifies not just Dorris, but all of the dancers. He believes the dancers 'lack life' and are monotonous, that is, until he sees Dorris. Then once he focuses on Dorris, he forms his own opinion in seconds. He has an inner dialogue in which he objectifies and sexualizes Dorris, all the while staring at her.

Based on John's inner monologue, it is obvious that he is only interested in Dorris as a sexual toy. It must be addressed, but at what point does scopophilia become voyeurism? This is no longer just looking and finding enjoyment in that act. John has progressed to imagining acts of sexual deviance. He imagines taking her to a dingy bedroom and doing all manner of things to her. He even thinks to himself that he will be bored of her in only five minutes unless he can get her in exactly the right way. Has his fantasizing perverted his gaze into voyeurism? He is precariously straddling the line.

But this highly sexualized fantasy is not entirely one sided; Dorris is also thinking of John while he is gazing at her. For the first time in *Cane*, the main girl is actually a willing participant in her own objectification. Mulvey says, "There are circumstances in which looking itself is a source of pleasure, just as, in the reverse

formation, there is pleasure in being looked at" (853). Obviously in this case Dorris is more than happy to be looked at and desired; Dorris even looks back. In returning his gaze, she allows herself to be a sexual object, revels in it. As she performs she thinks only of dancing to please him. She also has an inner monologue and fantasy, but hers is coming from a much different place.

Dorris' eyes burn across the space of seats to him.

Dorris: I bet he can love. Hell, he cant love. He's too skinny. His lips are too skinny. He wouldnt love me anyway, only for that. But I'd get a pair of silk stockings out of it. Red silk. I got purple. Cut it, kid. You cant win him to respect you that away. He wouldnt anyway. Maybe he would. Maybe he'd love. I've heard em say that men who look like him (what does he look like?) will marry if they love. O will you love me? And give me kids, and a home, and everything? (I'd like to make your nest, and honest, hon, I wouldnt run out on you.) You will if I make you. Just watch me.

Toomer, 52

Dorris has reversed their roles. Now she is gazing at John and judging him. Dorris is fantasizing about John, but in her case she is looking for love and not a one night stand. She is hoping that he will be the man that will be able to handle her passion; he is the right man and she can let down her protective shield. She is not afraid of using her

body to get what she wants. She wants him to watch her and to fall for her.

Unfortunately for Dorris, things do not turn out the way she had hoped. When Dorris stops dancing she looks at John, but he is now hidden in shadow. She tries to see what his reaction to her dance is, hoping that he wants her as much as she wants him, but sees nothing. According to "Visual Pleasure and Narrative in Cinema, Mulvey states: "An active/passive heterosexual division of labour has similarly controlled narrative structure. According to the principles of the ruling ideology and the psychological structures that back it up, the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification" (838). John could not handle Dorris' gaze, he could not be the man that she wanted him to be. She tried to bring down her walls and show him who she was, but it was too much power for John to handle and control. This is the first time that a woman in *Cane* has actively sought out another man's objectification of her. While Dorris is an active participant in his fantasy and plays into it, she still has no control over the outcome, leaving her broken and weeping.

"Box Seat" is another story in *Cane* that involves performances. It also involves dependency; dependence upon

a man for social stability and dependence upon said man for compassion and comprehension of the formerly stated social stability. Muriel loves Dan and wants to be with him, but because she is a woman she cannot just up and leave. There are social standards and norms by which she is restricted. She needs Dan to stand up for her and say that she is with him. She is totally reliant upon him. Muriel is hoping that Dan is the Mr. Right for her and that he is strong enough for her passions. Dan does not seem to grasp this and he does not understand where she is coming from.

Toward the end of the story, Dan and Muriel attend the theater; all eyes are on Dan. He becomes the center of attention and clearly does not like it.

Dan's eyes are half blinded. He moves his head. The light follows. He hears the audience laugh. He hears the orchestra. A man with a high-pitched, sentimental voice is singing. Dan sees the dwarf. Along the mirror flash the song comes. Dan ducks his head. The audience roars. The light swings around to Muriel. Dan looks. Muriel is too close. Mr. Barry covers his mirror. He sings to her. She shrinks away. The audience is square upon her. Its eyes smile. Its hands itch to clap. Muriel turns to the dwarf and forces a smile at him. With a showy blare of orchestration, the song comes to its close.

-Toomer, 66

Not only is Dan being looked at by everyone, but he is also unable to look back. He has been prevented from returning the gaze by the light being shined in his eyes. He cannot look at Muriel. Muriel also holds the gaze of the entire audience. Dan is no longer the sole bearer of the gaze and consequently has lost any control that he once had. This lack of control drives him into a mad outburst. Muriel's passion and sexuality are dominated by Dan and his gaze. Everything is told from his perspective and seen from the male gaze, once again invoking the "bearer of the gaze". What is interesting though is that when Dan's vision (re: gaze) is impaired, so is the reader's. Therefore, Dan's loss of control is also felt by the reader. She has lost the power of her sexuality because Dan has stolen it by making her his own personal sexual object. He controls her. He controls how the reader sees her and he controls her social status. When his gaze is obstructed, Dan gets into an argument with a fellow theatergoer. In doing so, he is thrown out of the theater. When Dan is thrown out of the theater he is essentially thrown out of society. Without Dan to help her, Muriel is lost and alone. She must once again hold her passions inside until a man comes along who has the strength and determination to be with her.

Toomer's "Bona and Paul" follows the quasi relationship between Paul and Bona. Bona is a white young lady from the South who is going to college in Chicago. Paul is a young black man who is attending the same college. This is another instance in which the lead female of the story objectifies the man first. In this case, Bona is gazing at Paul.

Bona can look close at him. His red-brown face-

Bona: He is a harvest moon. He is an autumn leaf. He is a nigger. Bona!

Toomer, 70

Bona struggles with her feelings as she gazes at Paul and, in the end, decides to put her heart on the line. She flirts with him while they play on opposite teams in a game of basketball.

Bona begins to feel a little dizzy and all in. She drives on. Almost hugs Paul to guard him. Near the basket, he attempts to shoot, and Bona lunges into his body and tries to beat his arms. His elbow, going up, gives her a sharp crack on the jaw. She whirls. He catches her. Her body stiffens. Then becomes strangely vibrant, and bursts to a swift life within her anger. He is about to give way before her hatred when a new passion flares at him and makes his stomach fall. Bona squeezes him. He suddenly feels stifled, and wonders why in the hell the ring of silly gaping faces that's caked about him doesn't make way and give him air. He has a swift illusion that it is himself who has been struck. He looks

at Bona. Whir. Whir. They seem to be human distortions spinning tensely in a fog. Spinning . . dizzy . . spinning.. Bona jerks herself free, flushes a startling crimson, breaks through the bewildered teams, and rushes from the hall.

Toomer, 71

This basketball game is like a dance, and represents their relationship. Bona starts out as the one that knows what she wants. She lusts after him. She has passion for him. Paul feels trapped by all of Bona's feelings. He is uncomfortable being the one that is gazed at and objectified. She has so much passion that he just does not understand.

While on a date together, Paul feels like he is being starred at, just like when he was playing basketball with Bona. He is more worried about what other people think than what is actually going on between the two of them. Finally Paul's passion begins to take over, just like in the basketball game. Both have decided that they want to go home together and see where the night will take them. They quickly leave together to go back home. On the way out the door though, Paul turns back to the doorman and stops to tell him about how he and Bona are different and are going to be together. When he turns back around Bona

is gone; this is paralleled in the basketball scene when she runs away.

This is the first instance in which the woman finally had power and was able to take control of the situation. For all intents and purposes, Paul left Bona alone on the street and she had no idea where he went. Paul had been going back and forth for the whole story as to whether or not he liked Bona. How was she supposed to know that he was going back to explain to the doorman that he thought the two of them could be together? In her mind, she must have believed that he was once again pulling away and so she decided that she had had enough. She decided to walk away from the relationship and is the first woman in *Cane* to take control of the relationship and still stay true to herself and remain unbroken.



## CHAPTER VI

### CARRIE K. AND A RETURN TO THE SOUTH: REDEFINING RELATIONSHIPS

While Bona may have been the first woman in *Cane* to take control of her relationship, Carrie K. is the only woman who is not defined by her relationship with a man. Carrie is clearly objectified, as are all women in *Cane*, by the men in her story.

[Lewis'] mind flashes images of her life in the southern town. He sees the nascent woman, her flesh already stiffened to cartilage, drying to bone. Her spirit-bloom, even now touched sullen, bitter. Her rich beauty fading... He wants to- He stretches forth his hands to hers. He takes them. They feel like warm cheeks against his palms. The sun-burst from her eyes floods up and haloes him. Christ-eyes, his eyes look to her. Fearlessly she loves into them. And then something happens. Her face blanches. Awkwardly she draws away. The sin-bogies of respectable southern colored folks clamor at her: "Look out! Be a *good* girl. A *good* girl. Look out!"

Toomer, 101-102

The entire description of Carrie K. is made from the point-of-view of Lewis. Not only does he objectify Carrie with his description of her, but he tries to possess her as well. When he holds her hands in his own and looks into her eyes he suddenly feels connected to God. She breaks away from Lewis when she reminds herself that she is a "good girl".

It is only through Carrie K. that Lewis is able to feel a connection to God. Carrie is put on a pedestal of piety and the men in 'Kabnis' think that the only way to reach God or have some kind of religious experience is through possessing her. The difference here is that Carrie must give this freely. Lewis tries to take it from Carrie, but Carrie pulls back, remembering who and what she is; a good girl.

Unlike with Lewis, Carrie freely gives her connection with God to Kabnis. After Kabnis' episode, Carrie takes his face in her hands and "draw[s] the fever out" (Toomer, 116). He falls to his knees and presses his face into her as she begins to pray, only to be interrupted by Halsey. With this, Carrie becomes an active participant, and as such, is no longer merely an object. In fact, Carrie K. becomes the observer and claims the gaze as her own: "And

then, seeing Carrie's eyes upon him, he swings the pail carelessly and with eyes downcast and swollen, trudges upstairs to the work-shop. Carrie's gaze follows him till he is gone." (Toomer, 116). Carrie K. is now in control of her relationship with Kabnis.

It is obvious from reading *Cane* that Jean Toomer writes with purpose, one of which is to bring attention to the objectification of women. Ironically, while trying to demonstrate this objectification, he must first objectify the women. The first paragraph of the first story of *Cane*, "Karintha", is the flat out objectification of the titular character. While Toomer is doing this to point out the oppression, sexualization and depersonalization of women and how wrong it is, it does not change the fact that he did so as well. Had the author of this book been female, this would not be an issue, or even a matter for discussion. Just the fact that the author is male means that he is automatically objectifying the women in his description of them.

Toomer, through odd narration, is clearly trying to stand up for women and show that they are more than just objects to be possessed. This can be seen throughout the stories as they progress. He describes the women slowly

standing up for themselves and no longer relying on their male counterparts. Through his odd choice in narration, Toomer is--in a sense--the main male protagonist throughout all of the stories as he is the one in control and controlling the gaze. His narration is the largest and most encompassing example of the "bearer of the gaze" as he is putting the reader in a world of his creation and they are "seeing" it through the "eyes" of his created narrator. The only issue is that the author is still a man and no matter what he does, every time he describes a woman, be she weak, strong, broken or whole; he is still depersonalizing her in his descriptions. It is a paradox; in his dissection of the issue of objectification he must consequently objectify the women.

Throughout *Cane*, each of these women is objectified to some extent. Some are complacent; others are even participants, going as far as to encourage the objectification; all are objectified by the author. But in the end, each woman is left as only a shell of who they were or could be, with the exceptions of Bona and Carrie. Bona is able to keep her identity, but in the end she is still had to sacrifice her relationship. Carrie is the only girl to hold on to her identity and still have a

chance at a relationship. The overarching message in Jean Toomer's *Cane* is, no matter how hard women try, and no matter what they do, they are not in control of their lives; the only way in which they can take back their identities and stay whole is to both allow themselves to be objectified, control "the gaze", and retain that control as Carrie K. did.

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