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Ambivalence in Jean Toomer's *Cane*

Ngwoke, Omeh Obasi
Department of English Studies
University of Port Harcourt
Choba, Port Harcourt
Rivers State, Nigeria
E-mail : omehngwoke@yahoo.com
Phone : +2348033420735

Abstract

In the lush landscape of Toomer criticism is a vacuum surprising related to *Cane*, the most notable creative output of the author and a book widely acknowledged as a masterpiece of the New Negro Movement. The said vacuum is the absence of a study on ambivalence in the book. Here then lies the significance of this essay whose aim is not so much to interrogate the said vacuum as to fill it. Combining insight from the sociological, biographical and psychoanalytical approaches to literary criticism, the study investigates the subject and discovers firstly, that there is a pervasive presence of ambivalence in the multi-genre work as it permeates all aspects of the book from its very title through its internal structure to its thematic concerns; secondly, that much of the ambivalent situations therein reflect the true experiences of the Negro folks in the post emancipation New World and of course the author's disturbed mental processes. The essay, therefore, concludes that a close examination of the intricate network of ambivalent situations in and out of *Cane* remains the best approach towards establishing its significance as a true masterpiece of the Harlem Renaissance.

Key Words: Ambivalence, contradiction, complexity, conflict, attitude, Jean Toomer, and *Cane*.

Introduction

...they sang. And this was the first time I'd ever heard the folk-songs and spirituals. They were very rich and *sad* and *joyous* and beautiful...The folk spirit...That spirit was so beautiful ... just this seemed to sum life for me. And this was the feeling I put into *Cane*.
(“The *Cane* Years” *Wayward* 123, my emphasis)

The above excerpt is taken from one of Jean Toomer's autobiographical sketches and it explains Toomer's experiences in Sparta, Georgia, part of which he puts into the making of *Cane*. Four adjectives in the epigraph - “rich,” “sad,” “joyous” and “beautiful” - are crucial to this study, but “sad” and “joyous” are more central to the concern of the essay. To begin with the less significant: like its folk-songs and spirituals sources, *Cane* has a very *rich* content (see Turner 1975 and 1980; Ikonne 1981 and 1978), and like the eponymous heroine of its first story, *Cane* boasts a uniquely complex form that is “carrying beauty perfect as dusk when the sun goes down” (*Cane* 3).

Now, “sad” and “joyous” capture the mixed feelings that characterize the experiences of post-emancipation Negro folks in the southern plantations, which they innocently and realistically sang about in their folk-songs and spirituals. These contradictory feelings of sadness and joy underscore the very essence of ambivalence in *Cane*. A common concept in literary criticism, ambivalence will here be taken to mean not just the sad-joy or love-hate feeling or attitude of a person towards something, but all manifestations of contradiction, uncertainty and conflict of opposing ideas, attitudes, or emotions within the book under study.

The life of an African American is fraught with unfortunate contradictions emanating basically from his double personality. According to W. E. B. DuBois, the African American “has two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body” (*Black Folk* 3). These unreconciled strivings, these warring ideals in one dark body and their consequential ambivalence have diversely and vigorously been explored in African-American literature down the centuries since the forceful arrival of the first batch of slaves in 1619 to the plantations in the New World. *Cane* is eventually one of such works and in it the ambivalent theme is given perhaps the most pervasive portrayal ever. Thus, as an “artistic record of real people and things seen and heard” (Ikonne, *From Du Bois* 127), *Cane* reflects deep rooted contradictions and uncertainties in the attitudes, lives and experiences of the embattled Negro folks in America. It is obviously in recognition of this fact that William Stanley Braithwaite declares that “*Cane* is a book of *gold* and *bronze*, of *dusk* and *flame*, of *ecstasy* and *pain*” (qtd. in Turner, “Introduction” ix, my emphasis).

Analytical Theories and Further Sources of *Cane's* Ambivalence

The foregoing, including the opening epigraph, yields *Cane* readily to sociological criticism, but there is sufficient evidence both in the text and in Toomer's life to warrant an eclectic approach that combines insight from sociology, biography and psychoanalysis. While sociological criticism examines the interplay of relationships between literature and society, biographical and psychoanalytical criticisms turn to the author, and the latter, to characters also, for clues to the meaning of a text. Therefore, the sociological critic searches in the text for clues consistent with the time, place and culture that gave it birth; the biographical critic, for pointers to some of the life experiences of the author; and the psychoanalytical critic, for evidences of the author's conscious and sub-unconscious mental processes lodged either in his characters or manifesting in the ways he handles other issues within the text.

While the opening epigraph portrays *Cane* as a mirror of Negro life, Darwin Turner sees *Cane* as a repository of Toomer's personal experiences. In his words: "to see *Cane* clearly, one needs first to look at its author" (x), arguing further that in the *Cane* stories, Toomer inserts himself as narrator and sometimes as a major or minor character and "included details about his life and relationships with people" (*Wayward* 9). Similarly, another scholar observes that Toomer is "a model for the speaker/narrator of his poems and sketches" (Ikonne, *From Du Bois* 127), and insists elsewhere that at some points the speaker/narrator (who is Toomer's alter-ego) betrays his own feeling ("Sexual Revolution" 28-29).

Toomer's personality, including his feelings, fears and general attitude, is indeed reflected in *Cane*. That personality is an ambivalent one and existing scholarship has stuck a biological handle to its origin thus making it a racial issue. In a letter to Claude McKay, an associate editor of *The Liberator*, Toomer declares:

Racially I seem to have (who knows for sure) seven blood mixtures: French, Dutch, Welsh, Negro, German, Jewish and Indian. Because of these, my position in America has been a curious one.... (qtd. in *Wayward* 18)

This clash of disparate bloods leads Toomer to declaring himself "a new American" (*Wayward* 48) rather than a black or white man.

Toomer's earlier and later attitudes towards the black race depict even more disturbing contradictions. In a letter to James Weldon Johnson, Toomer asserts: "My Poems are not Negro poems." But soon afterwards, he accepts his black ancestry for, according to Turner: "In correspondence with Sherwood Anderson during the years prior to the publication of *Cane*, he never opposed Anderson's obvious assumption that he was 'Negro'" (*Wayward* 11). Further heightening the conflicting attitude is

the insight given by Turner that very much earlier in Toomer's life, he was not vehement against his African ancestry, but rather apologetic and somewhat undecided. He quotes Toomer as saying:

In my body [are] many bloods, some dark blood, all blended in the fire of six or more generations... But if people wanted to say this dark blood was Negro blood and if they then wanted to call me a Negro - this was up to them ("Introduction" xiii).

Besides, Toomer had many black friends between 1920 and 1922 and mingled with many more in the all-black school in Sparta, Georgia (The experience which partly gave rise to *Cane*); but by 1934, after his grandparents had died, Toomer began to have white friends and associated with such scholars as Margaret Naumburg, Frank and Gurdjieff who influenced him, thus leading to the novel idea of a non-Negro and later a man of a new race (*Wayward* 58).

Considering the foregoing, we can surmise that Toomer fits into Sigmund Freud's conception of the artist. The Swiss father of the Psychoanalytical approach to literary criticism compares the writer to a neurotic patient. Explaining Freud's idea, Ann Dobie asserts that Freud sees the artist as "an unstable personality who writes out of his own neurosis, with the result that his work provides therapeutic insights into the nature of life not only for himself but also for those who read" (51). It becomes obvious then that Toomer's complexity goes beyond the general African-American double consciousness to something deeper and more intricate, something neurotic. The unusual spread and depth of contradictions in *Cane* account, therefore, for that authorial neurosis. Thus, applying the tenets of sociological, biographical and psychoanalytical criticism, the paper discusses ambivalence in *Cane* both as a reflection of the everyday experiences and attitudes of real people and things and as an unconscious manifestation of Toomer's life and troubled mental processes. The study shall, for convenience, leave out the poems and focus on the stories and the only play.

From Title to Structure

Ambivalence is first suggested by the title "cane," which is the short form of "Sugar Cane," one of the plants grown in the southern plantations and whose juice is used in making sugar cubes and grains. Sugar cane is sweet and bitter too. While its sweetness is obvious, its bitterness manifests itself in multiple dimensions: the taste one gets from drinking water after taking cane juice; the after-effect of an excessive in-take of its juice; the tedious nature of its plantation production including the discomfort and hurt which its sharp leaves cause the human skin when one wades through a cane field. In "Carma," one of the stories in the first part of the book, for example, the image of cane's discomfort is evoked when the narrator says: "It is

difficult carrying dead weight through cane” (13); and that of its hurt is hinted at in “Blood-Burning Moon,” when Bob Stone is said to have “crashed into the bordering canebrake. Cane leaves cut his face and lips. He tasted blood” (34).

Structurally also, *Cane* depicts different degrees of inconsistency having three unequal and unrelated parts and movements which parallel the uncoordinated wandering of the narrator/speaker from the South to the North and back to the South. The same disconnect is exhibited in the book’s disparate subjects for, according to Nellie McKay, the first section of *Cane* explores the southern folk culture while the second section deals with the urban life of Washington, D. C.; and the third section is about the racial conflicts experienced by a northern black person in the South (238).

In terms of genre, *Cane* is ambiguously inconsistent. There is no agreement among scholars as to what *Cane* is because it is neither a work in prose, poetry nor drama rather a combination of all and written in no specific order. Waldo Frank rightly calls it a “chaos of verse, tale, drama” (139) and, according to Anna Bontemps, *Cane* “appears to consist of assorted sketches, stories, and a novelette, all interspersed with poems. Some of the prose is poetic, and often Toomer slips from one form into the other almost imperceptibly. The novelette is constructed like a play” (xii). While confessing that “The task of analyzing such a monumentally famous book is not made easier by *the confusions* attending the mere labeling of it in terms of genre” (133, my emphasis), Seiyifa Koroye chronicles the frustration and disagreements of earlier scholars on the same issue. To Robert Bone, *Cane* is an “experimental novel” and, rejecting Bone's classification, Turner describes it as “a collection of character sketches, short stories, poems, and a play.” Opposing Turner, Nathan Huggins and Margaret Perry respectively describe the last section of the book as a story and not a play (Koroye 133).

The Image of Africa

In *Cane*, Africa is cast in an ambiguous light. She is portrayed as embodying conflicting features - negative and positive. This ambivalent image of Africa has, however, been ever-present in African American literature from the slave era to the present age, and it is best illuminated by a comparative look at works of black American writers. While, for instance, Africa in some of these works is “my pagan land,” the “land of errors and Egyptian gloom” (Wheatley) or that land where “black deeds are done” (McKay); in others, it is “that land of invigorating sun” and the “land where the gods loved to be” (according to the Garveyite “Universal Ethiopian National Anthem”).

Despite being an image already extensively explored by previous black writers, Toomer's handling of it in *Cane* carries the fervour of the Harlem Renaissance as conveyed in Langston Hughes’ famous manifesto of the movement.

According to Hughes, Africa and Africans are proud of the fact that they “are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs” (“Racial Mountain” 692). This renewed zeal in making an unequivocal realist projection of Africa and Africans becomes part of the thrust of Toomer’s creativity especially in the Georgia stories like “Karintha,” “Carma,” and “Esther.” In these stories, the subject is given graphic, but symbolic, illustration.

Toomer projects an Africa whose stupendous beauty is smeared with ugly dark spots. The first symbol of these conflicting features of the black continent and her citizenry is the eponymous heroine of the first story whose physical beauty conflates with her moral bankruptcy. Karintha is “carrying beauty perfect as dusk when the sun goes down;” her “skin is like dusk on the eastern horizon;” and she is “innocently lovely as a November cotton flower”. But, she is also a prostitute (a career she takes up as early as age twelve), mischievous, stubborn and rascally (3).

Toomer uses two black characters, Carma in “Carma” and Barlo in “Esther”, to depict another pair of Africa’s contradictory qualities. These are the qualities of strength and weakness. In his handling of this duo, Toomer tries to show that Africans are physically strong, but emotionally and morally weak. Like Karintha, Carma is an eponymous heroine of her story and her physical strength contrasts with her emotional frailty. She is a strong plantation worker, the Nigger woman “Who was strong as a man. Stronger” (13) and who “stands behind the old brown mule, driving the wagon” (12) down Dixie Pike; but her strength of body does not translate to that of character for she is chronically promiscuous – she is an adulteress. Carma has lovers other than her husband, and when he confronts her, she denies it and feigns anger as proof of her innocence. Thus, “Grabbing a gun, she rushed from the house and plunged across the road into a canebrake” and fires a shot. A search party dashes to the canebrake and “a curious, nosey somebody looked for the wound.” As proof of Carma’s uncontrollable libido, “This fusing with her clothes aroused her” and as a result of the arousal, “Her eyes were weak and pitiable for so strong a woman” (13).

Barlo is perhaps Toomer’s greatest manifestation of Africa’s ambivalent personality. In him, Toomer presents the typical African as a multi-talented individual evincing both positive and negative traits. While some of his positive traits may, by Toomer’s reckoning, include, among other things, raw physical strength (often demonstrated in manual labours) and the skills needed to positively utilize the strength, some of the negative traits relate to immorality and other sins antithetical to a religious life. This is why Barlo is at once a prophet of God and a vagrant preacher and also a gambler, a womanizer and a drunk. His detailed profile is indeed revealing of his ambiguous personality:

Black, Magnetically so. Best cotton picker in the country, in the state,
in the whole world for that matter. Best man with his fist, best man

with dice, with a razor. Promoter of church benefits. Of colored fairs. Vagrant preacher. Lover of all the women of miles and miles around (23).

It is not, however, clear whether in the above representations, Toomer tries to convey pure reality or to blend reality with stereotype. Undoubtedly, the reality about Africa and her citizens is that of beauty and ugliness. Yet, a keen observer will notice in the exploration of the negative aspects of the African, Toomer's knowledge of some of the existing white stereotypes about an average black male as a lover of sex and a potential rapist and a black woman as promiscuous and a shameless prostitute.

Black Americans' Attitude towards Africa

Also explored in *Cane* is a love-hate complex often manifested by Black Americans toward Africa, their ancestral root. Again, this complex has variously been explored by black artists before and after Toomer. A classic example is John William's protagonist in the film, *Omowale: The Child Returns Home* who after dreaming and singing about his adventurous return to Africa actually returns to Nigeria and, unimpressed by what he sees, immediately rushes back to the United States without discovering those fantastic things which he once heard and dreamed of about the continent. However, Toomer's method for expressing the said complex depicts a dynamism not previously known. While other artists' procedure – as evidenced by the above example - depicts a semicircular movement consisting of three stages comprising desire for Africa, quest for her, and a sudden withdrawal from her when found, Toomer's represents a complete cycle by its consisting, most times, of a fourth stage marked by a renewed desire for Africa (soon after the withdrawal) and a decision to do something for her, something good and costly perhaps to improve her lot.

While the symbols of Africa already noted retain their significance in the realisation of this theme, characters of the opposite sex who manifest some kinds of emotional attachment to the African symbols, represent the African Americans desirous of Africa's embrace. Again, Karintha, and Esther plus another character, Fern, are Toomer's vehicles for conveying the theme. While Karintha remains Africa, the impatient men who long to mate with her represent the African Americans desiring to visit and to know Africa, their ancestral home. According to the narrator:

Men had always wanted her, this Karintha, even as a child... Old men rode her hobby-horse upon their knees. Young men danced with her at frolics when they should have been dancing with their fellow grown-up girls. God grant us youth, secretly prayed the old men. The young fellows counted the time to pass before she would be old enough to mate with them (3).

As already noted, the desire and quest for Africa does sometimes lead to either emotional or physical visit to Africa. Here then lies the significance of the fulfillment of the men's wishes for, according to the narrator, Karintha, at twenty, "has been married many times." Like the protagonist in *Omowale* who gets no satisfaction at discovering Africa, Karintha does not reciprocate the men's love, instead "she has contempt for them" and only "smiles and indulges them when she is in the mood for it" (4). As a demonstration of Toomer's fourth stage in the ambivalent cycle, the "young men," despite Karintha's contempt for them, "run stills to make her money. Young men go to the big cities and run on the road. Young men go away to college. They all want to bring her money" (4).

A similar situation pans out in "Fern", another story in which the protagonist of the same name represents Africa while the men desiring her thighs symbolize African Americans. Here, as in the Karintha story, the ambivalent cycle is complete and is given an even more graphic portrayal. There is desire for Africa, quest for her, withdrawal from her, and then renewed desire for and decision to improve her lot as the undisputed root of the Africa American. Fern is beautiful and irresistibly alluring, so men cannot help but get attracted to her inviting eyes, but soon afterwards, they discover how wrong they are: "men saw her eyes and fooled themselves. Fern's eyes said to them that she was easy" (14), but she was not. When a few men succeed in making love to her while she is young, they "got no joy from it" (14); yet "once done they felt bound to her (quite unlike their hit and run with other girls)... vowing to themselves that someday they would do some fine thing for her" (14). According to the narrator, "She did not deny them, yet the fact was that they were denied."

Summing up the situation, the narrator says:

Men were everlastingly bringing her their bodies. Something inside of her got tired of them, I guess, for I am certain that for the life of her she could not tell why or how she began to turn them off... They began to leave her, baffled and ashamed, yet vowing to themselves that someday they would do some fine thing for her (16).

It is only in "Esther" that the ambivalent cycle is not complete. Here, Toomer reverts to the traditional semicircular curve which begins with a desire for Africa and ends in a withdrawal from her. An ugly mulatto, Esther unlike the previous heroines, symbolizes the African American desiring and questing for Africa here presented as King Barlo. Like most Black Americans, Esther lacks the confidence needed for such a quest. All the same, she embarks on the journey but gets rebuffed by the same object of her quest and then, she withdraws. The following scene is indeed dramatically revealing:

“Well, I’m sholy damned – skuse me, but what, what brought you here, lil milk-white gal?”

“You.” Her voice sounds like a frightened child’s that calls homeward from some point miles away.

“Me?”

“Yes, you Barlo.”

“This

aint th place fer y. This aint th place for y.”

“I know. I know. But I’ve come for you.”

“For me for what?”

She manages to look deep and straight into his eyes... He is slow at understanding... His faculties are jogged... She sees a smile, ugly and repulsive to her, working upward through thick liker fumes. Barlo seems hideous... She draws away, frozen. Like a somnambulist she wheels around and walks stiffly to the stairs. Down them. (26-27)

Racial Conflict

Toomer also enunciates the theme of racial conflict through the machinery of contradictions. The central figure in this is the tragic mulatto and perhaps any other character couched in situations similar to those of a mulatto. The mulatto as well as every Negro is, first of all, troubled within and then without by the conflicts of racial acceptance and rejection. Sometimes, the same issue of racial difference and inequality inhibit white characters from fully expressing themselves in terms of emotional desire for citizens of the opposite race. The result becomes a fierce conflict between internal urge and external restriction. While the first aspect is explored through such southern stories as “Esther”, “Becky”, and “Blood Burning Moon” and the only play, “Kabnis”, the second is enunciated in the urban stories of Washington DC including “Theatre”, “Box Seat”, and “Bona and Paul.”

The Mulatto is often embroiled in the crisis of sometimes wanting to identify with the white aspect of herself, and at some other times wanting to be black. This is the situation in which Esther finds herself. According to the narrator, Esther wishes to be like the sharply dressed white girl that passes by; and immediately after that, she does not want to be like her anymore. Similarly, she learns the names of the black folks who come to her father’s store and immediately forgets them.

Heightening her trauma is her ugliness. She has a "...High-cheek-boned chalk-white face. Esther's hair would be beautiful if there were more gloss to it. And if her face were not prematurely serious, one would call it pretty. Her cheeks are too flat and dead for a girl of nine (22). This ugliness causes men of both races to reject her: "I don't appeal to them" (22). Her rejection by the white race is symbolized first, by an affair she had with "a little fair boy while still in school" which "ended in her shame when he as much as told her that for sweetness he preferred a lollipop" (24-25), and second, by the attitude of the "salesman from the north who wanted to take her to the movies" but "never came back, having found out who she was" (25). Her rejection by the black race, on the other hand, is symbolized by the already-mentioned rebuff she suffered in the hands of King Barlo.

In "Becky," ambivalence is manifest in the personality of the protagonist and her attitude as well as in the attitude of both the white and black folks that inhabit the story. The protagonist, Becky, exemplifies black and white racial ambivalence because she consists of a half white and half black personality. She is white by her colour and parentage, but her soul is black as demonstrated by her love and desire for the black man as evidenced by her having two black sons. That she keeps her affairs with her children's black father(s) discreet shows her understanding of the restrictions within the society in which she lives; but her insistence on only the black folks as sexual partners (she never had a white child), shows her rebellion against both the white folk and the restrictions imposed on inter-racial liaison by them.

It is in the attitude of the black and white folks towards the deviant Becky that the theme of racial ambivalence is more deeply rooted. Both blacks and whites in the southern state setting of "Becky" love and hate her and this, by extension, represents their attitudes towards their own and the opposite races. Both folks hate Becky for her promiscuous lifestyle. Thus, the white folks call her "common, God-forsaken, insane white shameless wench" (7), and the black folks describe her as a "crazy woman" (7). Consequent upon her breaking the miscegenation law, both folks agree to banish her and actually do so; yet they cannot hide their love for her as they build her a cabin by pooling their donations of land, building materials and communal labour. It is also said that both the "White folks and black folks feed her and her growing baby" (7) and also are apprehensive and terrified when it seems that the banished Becky might be in some sort of danger in the little cabin built by them on a strip of land between the railroad and the road. According to the narrator, "a creepy feeling [came] over all who saw that thin wraith of smoke and felt the trembling of the ground" (6) as the trains rumbled by near her rickety cabin.

Beyond symbolizing Becky, the location of her solitary home between the railroad and the road is also symbolic of the paradox that characterises the black and white races' attitude towards each other. The whites need the blacks for sustenance,

especially as it concerns continued work at the plantations; yet, they cannot suppress their hatred for the same black race. The same goes for the black race whose citizens desire black identity, but cannot entirely relinquish their citizenship of the American nation which their toiling helped to build.

In "Blood-Burning Moon," is an allegorical racial ambivalence enunciated through the instrumentality of double consciousness. Belonging not to one but both races, the Negro suffers within his/her soul the conflict of acceptance of the black and white races and the result painted of this symbolic racial conflict in the present story is tragic. The Negro at the centre of the story is, again, a beautiful teenage black girl, Louisa. Her two boyfriends, Bob Stone, a white boy and Tom Burwell, a black boy stand for the two warring factions within the single black body. The omniscient narrator lets us into the conflict within Louisa as she walks home from the "white folk's kitchen" (28) where she works:

His black balanced, and pulled against, the white of Stone, when she thought of them. And her mind was vaguely upon them as she came over the crest of the hill, coming from the white folk's kitchen... She loves both of them, thus, the confusion which sets into her head: "A strange stir was in her, indolently, she tried to fix upon Bob or Tom as the cause of it" (28).

The fierce fight between Bob and Tom becomes the outward manifestation of the internal conflict. The narrator succeeds in painting a vivid gory picture of the brawl which sees Tom slashing Bob, the white folk burning Tom alive and Louisa getting "dazed, hysterical, refused to go indoors" (34).

In "Theatre" Doris is a white girl and a symbol of that race while John is black and also a symbol of his race. Doris feels something for John, the director's brother, and even dances to attract him, but almost immediately, we hear her make some unfriendly remarks against him. Soon, when her gaze falls again on John, the desire wells up in her once more and she is tormented by mixed feelings about John's ability to or not to love: "I bet he can love. Hell he can't love..." (52). Thus, Doris is like Becky whose society forbids romance with the black race, but whose inner self evinces strong affection for the forbidden race.

Dan and Muriel in "Box Seat" are ambivalent characters. Dan has a messianic mission to the black race but changes when he comes in contact with Muriel and falls in love with her. A critic sums up the situation:

Muriel is so much of Mrs. Pribby that her presence in Dan's life makes the apostle to the "withered people" ambivalent towards the sickness he has come to cure...He sings the praise of Muriel while on

the other hand he felt the “portly Negress” and the old slave (Ikonne, *From Du Bios* 133).

Muriel, on her part, is deeply in love with Dan but faces serious conflict within concerning his race because her middle-class social status inhibits her. Thus, she rejects Dan, but ironically later accepts the Negro dwarf who is far below Dan’s personality.

Paul in “Bona and Paul” is a fictional version of Toomer in a Chicago school in 1916. A contradictory character, the blackness Toomer tries to suppress in real life gets control of him in his fictional incarnation because among other things, Paul always sees in his mind’s eyes, “a Negress chant[ing] a lullaby beneath the male-eyes of a southern planter” (73). This shows he is conscious of his *Negroness* in him as he is also aware of his whiteness which is symbolised by his romance with Bona, a white girl.

Right from the beginning of their affair, Paul is not sure of what Bona actually feels for him. He is not also sure of what he feels for her. At the Boulevards, for instance, when they entangle and Bona wants to kiss him, the zeal in him suddenly turns cold unveiling the mixed feeling within him. Also, his words with the black-faced doorman at the crimson Gardens are evident of same attitude: “That felt passion, contempt and passion for her whom I did not know” (78).

Two black characters, Kabnis and Lewis, in “Kabnis” could be said to represent the conflict within Toomer in relation to his black ancestry. It would be recalled that Toomer had trouble reconciling with the dark part of him. While Kabnis represents that aspect of Toomer that rebelled against Africa, Lewis symbolizes the latter Toomer who identifies with the black race. In the play, Kabnis shows contempt for “this preacher-ridden race” (88), and when Lewis tries, for instance, to force him to accept “Father John” as “Symbol, flesh, and spirit of the past” (107), Kabnis denies the old man: “He aint my past. My ancestors were southern blue bloods” (107).

On the other hand, when Lewis goes underground with Kabnis, he does not want to shift his gaze from the old man, “father,” whom he describes as the symbol of their slave past. Lewis seats in a position in which his gaze would be fixed on “Father” whom he gives the name, “Father John” (105). Thus, like the later Toomer, Lewis reconciles with his ancestral (African) root, his source: “Lewis, seated now so that his eye rest upon the old man, merges with his source and lets the pain and beauty of the South meet him there “(106).

Characters’ Attitude towards Christianity, Christ and God

Present in *Cane* also are African-American characters whose attitude towards the Christian religion, Christ and God is inconsistent. What one notices is a mixture

of blasphemy and near devotion which smacks of hypocrisy. It is perhaps this felt hypocrisy that warrants Zora Neale Hurston to conclude that “the Negro is not a Christian really” (226).

In “Kabnis,” for instance, the protagonist sometimes shows contempt for God. In the following lines God is scorned and compared to a wicked coloured man just to drive home the feeling that God is wicked and cares less about the speaker’s state:

God is a profligate red-nosed man about town...God, he doesn’t exist, but nevertheless He is ugly. Hence what comes from Him is ugly. Lynchers and businessmen, and that cockroach Hanby, especially...God and Hanby, they belong together. Two godam moral-sputters (85).

Despite disparaging God, Kabnis, suddenly seeing the heavenly beauty of God’s creation under the moonlight, kneels in reverence to Him; and recognizing the powers of God and Jesus, he pleads: “God, Almighty, dear God, dear Jesus, do not torture me with beauty” (85).

However, it is Kabnis’ situation that gives rise to this blasphemous ambiguity towards God and Jesus. According to him, the handiwork of God is “ugly” because “it hurts you.” It is interesting how his voice of reasoning restrains the spontaneous animal urge in him whenever it strays to negative excesses. The voice keeps coming: “come, Ralph, pull yourself together.” When he blasphemes against God and Hanby, he cautions himself immediately: “Oh, no, I wont let that emotion come up in me, stay down I tell you” (85), and praises Jesus “Oh, Jesus, thou art beautiful” (85).

As in their spirituals of old, the 20th century Negro sometimes thinks of going to heaven – Camp Ground – that place made by the same God whom he castigates. This is the significance of the following poem whispered by the winds – the “soft-voiced vagrant poets” - also in “Kabnis”:

White-man’s land.
Nigger, sing.
Burn, bear black children
Till poor rivers bring
Rest, and sweet glory
In Camp Ground (87).

Up North, Kabnis used to go to church but here in Georgia, he is contemptuous of the Negro church, its members and preachers. He may, however, be

justified because of the hypocrisy of the church members and priest. They preach love and care and do nothing when their black brother is being lynched. And Christ the owner of the church does not also consider the predicaments of the coloured people, by Toomer's own assessment. As Layman explains, the worst black sinners in Georgia are the most engrossed in the loud singing and shouting in the church:

You take a man what drinks, the biggest licker-head around will come into the church an yell in loudest. An the sister what don wrong, an is always doing wrong, will sit down in the Amen corner an swing her arms an shout her head off (90).

A sister actually shrieks in the midst of a church service naming Christ and God and mouthing repentance in a most hypocritical fashion:

A shriek pierces the room... The sister cries frantically: 'Jesus, Jesus I've found Jesus. O Lord, glory to God, one more sinner is acomin home.' (90)

No wonder Kabins has a mixture of "fear, contempt and pity" (89) for them.

In sum, Jesus and God constitute a motif in *Cane*. Both figures are mentioned everywhere in the book demonstrating devotion to them by the average Negro; but the devotion is to be taken with a pinch of salt because often the names of God and Jesus are taken in vain and blasphemed against. For instance, Karintha, in spite of her promiscuity, "wants the wind to "rise/ And take [her] soul to Jesus" (4). The old men, as already noted, want God to grant them youth in order to mate with Karintha. The God in "Becky" is sometimes the true God whose personality the characters often misinterpret (white and black folks "prayed secretly to God who'd put His cross upon her and cast her out" 7); and some other times he is a mechanized God (like the "a blue sheen God" 7) signifying a locomotive. Apart from the narrator always repeating the phrase "O pines, whisper to Jesus," at some point, the wind is expected to "tell Him to come and press Jesus-lips against" the lips and eyes of the erratic children of Becky. The height of the blasphemy is reached when "Barlo mumbling something, threw his bible on the pile" (9) that is the dead Becky's rubble.

Conclusion

There, obviously, has been no literary work of black Diaspora in which ambivalence is more roundedly and deeply explored than in *Cane*. When Huggins declared that "of all these Harlem Renaissance efforts to define Negro identity, Jean Toomer's seems the most profound and provocative" (qtd. in Koroye 113), he obviously was enthralled by the young writer's handling of ambivalence. The subject, as has been demonstrated, is very profoundly and provocatively handled in *Cane* as the author makes it a matter not only of content, but also of form. He ingeniously

weaves it into every aspect of the book from its title and internal structure, to its thematic engagements some of which relate to the image of Africa and African Americans' attitude toward Africa, the racial conflict in which the Negro is embroiled, and Negroes' attitude towards the Christian religion, Christ and God.

The study establishes that *Cane* owes its ambivalent situations to a combination of sources, namely, the experiences of other people here represented by poor Negro folks in Georgia, Negroes and white folks in Washington DC and Chicago and then the author's own life experiences; and that in all this, a psychological aspect of the author which made him an unstable personality comparable to a neurotic patient takes a greater toll on his creativity in the book. The result, it has been established, becomes the pervasive and disparate evidences of ambivalence in *Cane*.

In all, therefore, *Cane* is a book of contradictions in tune with real human situations. These are situations eloquently couched in the book's title, which is name for one of the most ambivalent products of humankind the very nature of which Grace Nichols, a Caribbean poet, has thoughtfully chronicled in an allegorical poem of the same title. According to the poem:

There is something
about sugarcane

he isn't what
he seem –

indifferent, hard
and sheathed in blades

his waiving arms
is a sign for help

his skin thick
only to protect
the juice inside
himself.... (*Hinterland* 301)

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