

Cane

By Jean Toomer

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Reading Level: 11th-12th Grade

INTRODUCTION

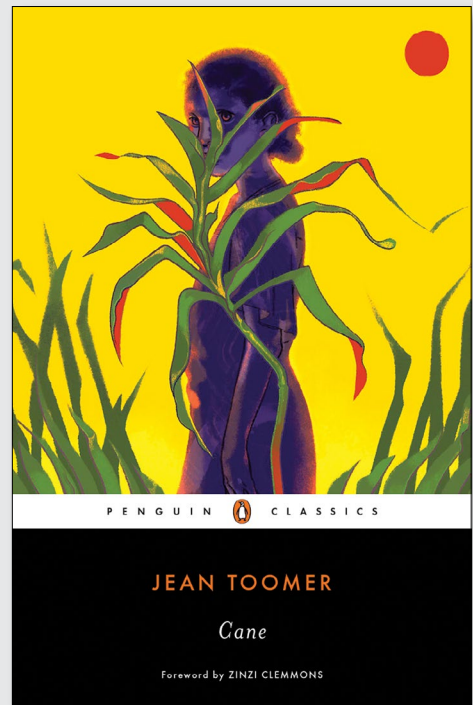
First published in 1923, Jean Toomer's *Cane* is the ground-breaking vision of a new American identity. It is a migratory tale that takes readers from the cane and cotton fields of the Southern Delta to the industrialization of the urban North. It is also a complex and often contradictory collage of poetry and prose, a mixture of time, place, and identity that lays bare the lost dreams and fragmented souls of black Americans in Toomer's time. Likewise, with its themes of racism, sexism, and a revisioning of the American dream, *Cane* is most definitely a novel for now.

Today's students can visit any news or social media site and witness the racial, cultural, and gender divisions being played out on the stage of 21st-century America. President Barack Obama warned of this reality in his farewell speech, declaring, "After my election, there was talk of a post-racial America. Such a vision, however well-intended, was never realistic. For race remains a potent and often divisive force in our society." Toomer's text illustrates this division and the timeless struggle to overcome it.

The guide is divided into three sections that align with the format and themes of Toomer's text; teachers may choose to assign all or some of these sections, questions, and activities. Two compelling questions provide an overall line of inquiry and frame the critical reading, writing, and thinking activities found in the guide:

Teacher's Guide

**INCLUDES: CHAPTER SUMMARIES,
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS,
CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES,
AND LINKS TO RESOURCES**



INTRODUCTION (CONTINUED)

- What does it mean to be black in America? How have artistic and cultural depictions of African Americans changed or stayed the same since the age of Jean Toomer's *Cane*?
- How do Toomer's stylistic choices support the text's overall purpose, theme, and aesthetic beauty?

These complex questions echo the complex history of African Americans in our country and prepare students for the rigor of reading Jean Toomer's *Cane*.

PREPARING FOR THE COMPLEXITIES OF JEAN TOOMER'S *CANE*

Classroom Activities

Like the artwork of its time, *Cane* has a structure that cannot be easily qualified. The novel shifts between poetry, vignette, short story, and dramatic dialogue; the reader is often plunged into the artist's or his characters' deconstructed subconscious. Prepare students for Toomer's complicated structure with an introduction to Surrealist art and its origins in the early 1920s. Two possibilities include Salvador Dali's "The Persistence of Memory" (<https://www.moma.org/collection/works/79018>) or Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* (<https://www.pablocicasso.org/guernica.jsp>). Ask students to individually observe the painting, then write a response using the *See-Wonder-Think* strategy (<https://www.teachingchannel.org/video/thinking-routine-getty>). In this open-ended questioning protocol, students respond in writing to three questions: "What do you see?" "What do you wonder?" "What do you think?" After recording their observations, questions, and interpretations, students can share their thinking with partners or the class. They might question why Dali's clocks are all bent/broken or observe the multiple sources of artificial light in Picasso's painting.

Provide further context for the text's structure by posting a quotation from Langston Hughes' essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (<https://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/content/langston-hughes-negro-artist-and-racial-mountain-1926>): "We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too." Invite students to consider Hughes' words, then turn and share ideas with a partner. Explain to students that African American artists from this era recognized that they would not be accepted into the traditional literary canon, so instead of attempting the impossible, many purposely crossed lines, broke rules, and created an anti-genre free from restriction.

In addition to Toomer's complicated style, the author also makes historical references that may be unfamiliar to students. Model how to navigate the novel by selecting a short excerpt from section one. The novel's first vignette, "Karintha," is a good choice for this activity. Demonstrate how to use the "Say Something" strategy (<https://www.tolerance.org/classroom-resources/teaching-strategies/community-inquiry/say-something>), a close reading protocol that students can use independently as they read the rest of the text. After the teacher models, student partners take turns quietly reading aloud short sections of text before stopping to "say something" to one another. Students can choose to ask a question, make an inference, clarify a point, or take a moment to annotate their thinking. They can also take this time to reference the excellent notes provided at the end of the novel. The purpose of this strategy is to encourage readers to stop and interact with complex

**PREPARING FOR
THE COMPLEXITIES
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(CONTINUED)**

text, to “say something” inside their own heads in order to read more closely and comprehend more fully. “Say Something” sentence starters can be found at <http://msjohnstonenglish.weebly.com/uploads/2/6/2/9/26296334/sentencestarters-saysomethingreadingstrategy.pdf>.

College and career ready standards ask students, rather than teachers, to determine the themes and central ideas in a text and to analyze their development and interaction over time. Ask students to keep a “Themes Tracker” for themes they uncover in *Cane*. As students read and begin noticing a theme developing, direct them to create a new entry in their tracker. For instance, students might determine that “male-female relationships,” “racial identity,” and “the artist’s role” appear to be recurring themes in Toomer’s text. Students can track these themes digitally or by hand. Explain that students may need to backtrack and find evidence earlier in the novel as they realize a pattern is forming. Students might share their themes and central ideas with each other and add new entries for classmates’ ideas. If students need help getting started, choose one theme and model how to track its development from section to section. Alternatively, ask students to use different color highlighters to identify themes as they read. Marginal notes can be used to analyze how the themes are developing and interacting over time.

PART ONE

Summary

In this first part of the text, Toomer utilizes poetry, short stories, and vignettes to illustrate the realities of a South that is naturally beautiful but ripe for change. Themes central to this section include racial identity, nature, and the role of southern black women in early twentieth-century America.

Common Core Standards Focus

- Determine and analyze themes over the course of the text
- Analyze how an author’s choices contribute to overall structure, meaning, and aesthetic impact

Text Set

Collins, Cory. *When Decor Is More Than Decor*. Teaching Tolerance: 21 September 2017. Article. <https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/when-decor-is-more-than-decor>.

Jacobs, Tom. *Research Suggests Black Women Are More Likely to be Objectified and Dehumanized*. Pacific Standard: 11 September 2018. News Article <https://psmag.com/social-justice/black-women-are-more-likely-to-be-objectified-and-dehumanized>.

Classroom Activities

Much of Toomer’s poetry in part one involves images of cotton, cane, and the natural landscape of the South. The poet uses nature to illustrate an oppressive culture that is dying and being replaced by a coming societal shift. Ask students to analyze one or more of this section’s poems using the TPCASTT method (http://www.readwritethink.org/files/resources/30738_analysis.pdf). With this close-reading tool, students perform a rhetorical analysis by examining title, paraphrase, con-

PART ONE
(CONTINUED)

notation, attitude/tone, shifts, title (again), and theme. Toomer's "November Cotton Flower" works well as it is a sonnet with a defined shift between the barren imagery of the first eight lines and the motif of rebirth in the final sestet. Ask students to write a summary statement at the bottom of their chart. In it, they might answer the compelling question: How do Toomer's stylistic choices support the text's overall purpose, theme, and aesthetic beauty? As an extension, ask students to read the Teaching Tolerance article, "[When Decor Is More Than Decor](#)," which explains the current and historic racial implications of cotton. Questions might include: What are the two "clashing interpretations" outlined in the article? How does the writer support the view that "cotton is a symbol of racial terror"?

Toomer's vignettes portray African American women who are punished for their sexual power, regardless of whether they chose to use it. Perform a close reading of two or more of the following: "Karintha" (p. 1), "Becky" (p. 6), "Carma" (p. 12), and "Fern" (p. 19). While reading, ask students to track the sexual objectification of southern black women in two or more of these vignettes. Students can create a double column chart with titles on the left side and text annotations on the right. Annotations might include quotations, observations, or comparisons about the role of black women as sexual objects to men. Afterwards, students might synthesize their thinking in a short written response. To provide context on the stereotyping of black women, the class might read "[Research Suggests Black Women are More Likely to be Objectified and Dehumanized](#)." Afterwards, discuss whether the portrayal of black women has changed since Toomer's novel was published.

Text-Dependent Questions

1. In "Karintha," why does Toomer repeat "Karintha is a woman" and "carries/carrying beauty"? Is this feminine power a heavy burden?
2. In "Reapers" and "November Cotton Flower," the poet utilizes imagery of death, dying, and new growth and includes the colors "black" and "brown." Why does Toomer place these poems at the beginning of his text? What might he see as dying in his time? What is about to be reborn?
3. In "Portrait in Georgia," Toomer paints a picture of female and physical desecration. Why does he make this stylistic choice? As part of your analysis, discuss the multiple contrasts found in the poem's imagery. What similarities can be seen in his poem "Face"?
4. In "Becky," Toomer describes the main character's house as "islandized between the road and railroad track" (p. 7). What is his purpose in using "islandized"? Why is Becky "between" two worlds? Compare her situation to that of Esther (p. 27). What links their situations? What sets them apart?
5. Why does Toomer title his poem "Georgia Dusk"? What does this time of day suggest about the writer's broader themes and purpose in this section of the text?
6. In the final paragraph of "Blood-Burning Moon" (pp. 46-47), Toomer describes Tom's murder at the stake. Why does Toomer choose to write this section of the story in fragments? How might Tom be considered a Christ figure in his death? Cite specific words and images that support this literary motif.

PART TWO

Summary

Part two is set in the big cities of the North. Once again Toomer uses both prose and poetry to portray young, black southerners who have migrated North only to encounter broken dreams, lost souls, and false identities. Significant themes in this section are the disintegration of modern society and the accompanying failure of men and women to make real, personal connections.

Common Core Standards Focus

- Analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone
- Analyze multiple interpretations

Text Set

Hughes, Langston. *Harlem*. Poem. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46548/harlem>.

Lawrence, Jacob. *The Migration Series*. Paintings. <https://lawrencemigration.phillipscollection.org/>.

Classroom Activities

Invite students to analyze Toomer's male-female relationships by building a double-bubble map (<https://www.dvusd.org/cms/lib/AZ01901092/Centricity/Domain/1535/map-double-bubble.pdf>). Ask students to select either John and Dorris from "Theater," Dan and Muriel from "Box Seat," or Bona and Paul from "Bona and Paul." After reading, students should review the text, looking for evidence of each character's motivation. Using paper or a digital device to create the double-bubble map, ask students to compare and contrast the dreams and desires of each character. Similar motivations get placed between the circles; opposing motivations are posted to the respective sides. After creating the visual, students should look over their map and discuss: What does it reveal? What forces simultaneously push and pull these couples, ultimately preventing them from meaningful connections? What is Toomer implying about each person's dreams for their lives? Next, ask the class to read Langston Hughes' "*Harlem*," a poem about "dreams deferred." Discuss: In what ways does Hughes' poem echo Toomer's text?

While reading, provide context for the movement of black people to the North highlighted in part two. Ask students to visit the interactive website entitled *Jacob Lawrence: The Migration Series*. Here, students can hear Lawrence describing his memories of moving to the North and explore all sixty panels of his epic artwork. Each panel is accompanied by a brief explanation; taken as a whole, they provide an excellent summary of the causes and effects of the "Great Migration." After students have engaged with the paintings, discuss: What parallels can be found between Lawrence's artwork and part two of *Cane*? What successes and struggles are made evident in Lawrence's and Toomer's works? Add rigor by asking students to analyze individual panels. Students can work independently or in pairs to complete an analysis. Excellent analysis templates that focus on observations, interpretations, and historical context can be found online at the *National Archives* (<https://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/worksheets>).

PART TWO (CONTINUED)

Text-Dependent Questions

1. In "Seventh Street," why does Toomer repeat the imagery of "black reddish blood into the white and white-washed wood of Washington" (p. 51)? Elaborate on his metaphor.
2. Why is Rhobert portrayed as a drowning man? What about the North is "drowning" this black southerner who has migrated North without his family? Describe the irony in Toomer's refrain: "Brother, life is water that is being drawn off" (p. 53).
3. How is the sonnet form an appropriate choice for Toomer's poem "Beehive?" Discuss the shift that occurs between the octave (first 8 lines) and the sestet (last six lines). What contrast is Toomer highlighting?
4. In the poem "Storm Ending," Toomer once again uses contradictory wording. Cite and explain specific instances of this language choice. What might be the storm that is ending?
5. In "Theater," Dorris and John fail to connect. What keeps them apart? How does Toomer's shift in narrative form when John dreams (p. 69) illustrate this disconnect?
6. In "Calling Jesus," Toomer uses a simile to compare a woman's soul to that of a lost dog. Is this an appropriate comparison? How does this characterization align with other depictions of women in his text?
7. In "Box Seat," Dan thinks of Muriel as a "she-slave.... [a] sweet, tame woman in a brass box seat" (p. 84). What does he see as enslaving her and the others who live in middle-class Northern neighborhoods? Explain the symbolism in the story's title and theater setting.

PART THREE

Summary

Part three, entitled "Kabnis," tells the story of a tortured artist back home in Georgia after living in the North. Moving from short story to drama, with several poems and songs in between, this section is a kaleidoscope of narration, imagery, and themes. Recurring motifs in "Kabnis" include finding artistic voice and the realities of the Jim Crow South.

Common Core Skills Focus

- Participate in a range of collaborative discussions
- Conduct research projects to answer a question or to deepen inquiry
- Use technology to produce and publish writing products

Text Set

Jim Crow Laws. Smithsonian National Museum of American History. Website. <http://americanhistory.si.edu/brown/history/1-segregated/jim-crow.html>.

What was Jim Crow. Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia. Website. <https://www.ferris.edu/Jimcrow/what.htm>.

What was the Harlem Renaissance? A Walk Through Harlem. Website. <https://ny.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/vt107.la.rv.text.whatharlem/what-was-the-harlem-renaissance/>.

PART THREE
(CONTINUED)

Classroom Activities

Direct students to the Smithsonian National Museum of American History's and the Ferris State University Museum of Racist Memorabilia websites on Jim Crow laws. Provide time for students to explore the primary documents and images in order to gather an impression of the atmosphere in the Jim Crow South. Then, break students into small groups that focus on a different aspect of the laws such as housing, restaurants, or transportation. Ask groups to analyze the effects of these laws on both black and white people in the early twentieth century, and to publish their analysis in a video montage or photo story posted on the class website or other social media venue. The idea is for groups to mix images, audio, and text to tell a story about one aspect of the Jim Crow South. One free and easy platform for storytelling with images and audio is Adobe Spark (<https://spark.adobe.com/>), which integrates media while placing focusing on content and providing an authentic audience for student writers.

Throughout this section, Ralph Kabnis explores the conflicted role of the artist and a need for a newly imagined art. Provide historic and literary context by asking students what they already know about the term "renaissance." Most will know it means "rebirth" and will be familiar with the European Renaissance. Next, show students one or more short video clips on the website entitled *What was the Harlem Renaissance? A Walk Through Harlem* which describes the social and cultural movement spurred by the Great Migration. Ask students to jot down key phrases that explain the meaning of the Harlem Renaissance. After viewing, discuss with the class: What was "dying" and what was "reborn" during the Harlem Renaissance? How did writers seek to find a new voice?

Now students are ready to deepen their analysis of part three. Ask half the class to look for and annotate Toomer's references to death, birth, or rebirth as they read. The other half will annotate references to art, artists, language, or voice. After students have read the story and completed their annotations, direct them to find a classmate from the opposite group and discuss their findings by returning to the original question about death and rebirth. What does the artist have to say about the lives of black people in the South? What does the artist offer?

As an extension, read with the class Langston Hughes' poem, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" (<https://ny.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/vtl07.la.ws.style.rivers/the-negro-speaks-of-rivers/>). Ask students: What similarities in diction or theme can be drawn between Hughes' poem and the "Kabnis" section of *Cane*? Students might notice Hughes' repetition of "My soul has grown deep like the rivers," and therefore make a connection to Toomer's references to nature and the soul in "Kabnis."

Challenge students to "text map" the complex structure of Toomer's "Kabnis" section. Create a giant, continuous scroll on the classroom wall, whiteboard, or floor by lining up and posting each page of the text horizontally. Assign partners or small groups one page or section of the map. Ask groups to re-read their section, and make the following annotations directly on their posted page:

- Label whether the excerpt is mainly narration, poetry, or drama.
- Briefly summarize or characterize each paragraph, stanza, or section in the excerpt.
- Make note of any connection between your labeled genre and summary. In other words, given the action or themes of this excerpt, why might the author have chosen this genre?

PART THREE
(CONTINUED)

When groups have completed their annotations, ask groups to color code the sections. Highlight narration in one color, poetry in another, and drama in a third. As a class, step back and observe the text map. Discuss: What do we notice as we look at our map? Are any patterns forming? Why might the author's structure shift and move in this way? How does changing the way we look at this section of the novel add to our understanding of the author's intent? How does Toomer's structure create meaning?

Text-Dependent Questions

1. At the beginning of the story, Kabnis struggles with various conflicting emotions. What does he fear?
2. Kabnis considers the Georgia landscape in contradictory terms. Using text evidence, describe his complex view of nature in the South.
3. What are some possible interpretations of Professor Layman's assertion that "this town's right good at feedin folks" (p. 117)? Explain the "hunger" Kabnis feels.
4. What does Kabnis mean when he says black people are a "preacher-ridden race" and "preacher's hands are in the white man's pockets" (p. 119)?
5. Why do Kabnis and Lewis react differently to the message on the rock thrown through the window?
6. Part 4 of the story takes us to the Halsey's workshop. What does the reader learn about the relationship between black people and white people in the town?
7. When Lewis meets Carrie, he is described as having "Christ-eyes" (p. 138). What is Toomer suggesting about the character of Lewis?
8. What does Lewis offer the men in the Hole and why does he find himself "completely cut out" in the end (p. 150)?
9. Considering the many references to religion in this section, how might Toomer's spiritual views be defined? Why does Father John say, "O th sin th white folks 'mitted when they made th Bible lie" (p. 157)?
10. At the novel's end, "The sun arises. Gold-glowing child, it steps into the sky and sends a birth-song slanting down gray dust streets and sleepy windows of the southern town" (p. 158). Has Kabnis found satisfaction? Support, oppose, or qualify a positive interpretation of Toomer's conclusion.

AFTER READING
JEAN TOOMER'S CANE

Classroom Activities

To address *Cane's* relevance in contemporary American culture, remind students of the compelling questions: What does it mean to be black in America? How have artistic and cultural depictions of African Americans changed or stayed the same since the age of Jean Toomer's *Cane*? Show them one artist's response. Jesse Williams's 2016 BET Humanitarian Award Acceptance Speech (<https://www.glamour.com/story/jesse-williams-bet-award-speech-2016>) calls out America's continued oppression against people of color, calling it "a system built to divide and impoverish and destroy us (which) cannot stand if we do." As they watch the video, students should write down at least one word, phrase, or line from Williams's speech that is significant and connects to the big ideas in *Cane*. Students might select: "Black

AFTER READING
JEAN TOOMER'S CANE
 (CONTINUED)

women “have spent their lifetimes dedicated to nurturing everyone before themselves,” or “Freedom is always coming in the hereafter but . . . the hereafter is a hustle. We want it now.” After viewing the speech, direct the class to share out with the “Save the Last Word for Me” strategy (<https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/teaching-strategies/save-last-word-me>). Students take one word, phrase, or line and meet in groups of four around the room. Group members take turns sharing their choice but wait for their classmates’ thoughts before explaining why they chose it. In this way, students build listening skills and allow their classmates’ thinking to inform their own.

As an extension to this activity, ask students to listen to the 1939 speech “What Does American Democracy Mean to Me?” (<http://americanradioworks.publicradio.org/features/blackspeech/mmbethune.html>) by Toomer’s contemporary and famous African American activist Mary McLeod Bethune. A written text is provided with the audio version. In it, Bethune reveals some of the very issues outlined by Jesse Williams in 2016. Ask students to draw direct comparisons between issues raised in both, then to discuss whether roles and depictions of African Americans have stayed the same or changed since Toomer’s time.

Distribute the *Washington Post* article “Lift Every Voice and Sing’: The Story Behind the ‘Black National Anthem’ that Beyonce Sang,” (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2018/04/16/lift-every-voice-and-sing-the-story-behind-the-black-national-anthem-that-beyonce-sang/>).

The news article provides historical background and cultural context for the 1899 James Weldon Johnson song that was originally written for Abraham Lincoln’s birthday but ultimately would be regarded as the “black national anthem.” As students read, ask them to color code and annotate using an adaptation of the “4 A’s” protocol. Students look for and annotate *assumptions* (main points the author or subjects are making); *agreements* (points on which you agree with the author or subject); *arguments* (points with which you disagree), and *applications* (connections to other texts or to contemporary life). Afterwards, ask students to share some of their annotations.

As a class, discuss:

- Should there be a black national anthem? Why or why not?
- How does the article address this question? What would Toomer say?
- How does reading *Cane* impact your thinking? What about race and society, if anything, has changed since Toomer’s time?

Alternatively, students can address one or more of the prompts in writing.

Hold a Paideia Seminar on one or all sections of *Cane*. Prior to the seminar, discuss with students what an ideal seminar looks and sounds like, including participation, active listening, and respect for multiple viewpoints. Ask students to set a class goal, such as: “Everyone will contribute to the discussion at least one time,” as well as a personal goal, such as: “I will mention a classmate’s name and extend on or disagree with their thinking.” Students should record their goals on paper or sticky-notes which are visible during the seminar. During the discussion, take a facilitator’s role. Ask a low-risk opening question to encourage total class participation in a round robin response, such as: “What might be an alternative title for the novel?” This question might be provided the night before. Its purpose is to identify main ideas in Toomer’s text. Then move to a core question for the purpose of analyzing

AFTER READING
JEAN TOOMER'S CANE
 (CONTINUED)

text details, such as: "How does Toomer's structure support his intent?" End the discussion with a closing question that promotes personalization and application, such as: "How might this novel's themes and ideas apply to a current social issue?" Ask students to evaluate their own and their classmates' speaking, thinking, and listening. Did they meet their class and personal goals? What should the class do differently in the next seminar discussion? How did the Paideia deepen their understanding of Toomer's text?

Whole Novel Writing & Discussion Questions

1. Toomer utilizes imagery of dusk, dawn, black, and white throughout the text. How do these references support the novelist's themes and purpose concerning race and identity?
2. Trace the theme of nature (cane, cotton, mud, earth) throughout the novel. How is the Southern landscape both beautiful and enslaving to the author?
3. In what ways are African American women dehumanized in the novel? Trace the Jezebel motif in Toomer's text. Provide specific text evidence.
4. What is the purpose of the arc appearing prior to each section of the novel? Discuss Toomer's geographic and thematic journeys.
5. In what ways do Toomer's structural shifts and fragmented text illustrate the disintegration of modern society? Select multiple examples and discuss.
6. Using evidence throughout the text, explain how the writer views traditional Black singing and songs of the South.
7. Kabnis exclaims, "O God, they're after me" and "Wanted to trap me here" (p. 124). What are Toomer's characters running from throughout the novel? What opposing forces are pushing and pulling them? How does the journey from South to North and back again support this motif?

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OF THIS GUIDE

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