**JEAN TOOMER**

Jean Toomer (26 December 1894—30 March 1967) was an American writer associated with literary modernism and the Harlem Renaissance. He was born as Nathan Pinchback Toomer in Washington, D.C. , and changed his name to Jean Toomer at the beginning of his writing career in 1920. Toomer is primarily known for his critically acclaimed book *Cane* (1923), an experimental collage text of narratives, dramatic pieces, and poems. He also published essays, literary reviews and criticism, poems, dramatic texts, and stories in journals and newspapers. Though opposing reductive racial categories, Toomer was in close contact with the New Negro movement, initiated by Alain Locke, while he was working on *Cane*. Being of multiracial descent, he could easily pass for white, and lived both as black and white at different stages of his life. After the publication of *Cane*, he rejected all racial classifications. In the early 1920s, Toomer turned toward the spiritual ideas of George Gurdjieff, whose school of higher consciousness and spiritual self-development he followed and taught himself until 1935. In his later life, he became interested in Quakerism. With the exception of a collection of aphorisms, Toomer did not publish any more books after *Cane* during his lifetime.

Juxtaposing materials of different genres, *Cane* possesses an intricate internal structure. It consists of three sections alternately set in the South and the North of the United States. Its poems and narratives evoking powerful images of lynching and racial miscegenation, the text of *Cane* is deeply invested in an exploration of the complicated American history of racial oppression. At the time of its initial publication by Boni and Livewright, the book, though not a commercial success, received considerable critical attention, especially from contemporary African American critics and intellectuals. A second edition appeared in 1927, but then remained out of print until 1967. Since then, Toomer’s work has attracted significant scholarly interest and *Cane* has become firmly integrated into the literary canon. Though Toomer continued writing almost till his death, the only other book he published during his lifetime was a privately published collection of aphorisms called *Essentials.* More recently, scholars have been exploring Toomer’s unpublished manuscripts, most of which are collected in Beinecke Library at Yale University. Many of Toomer’s essays, short stories, and poems can be found in periodical and little magazines, such as *Liberator*, *Crisis*, *Modern Review*, *Little Review*, and many others.

Collections of Toomer’s Works

* Rudolph Byrd and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., eds. *Cane: A Norton Critical Edition* (2011)
* Darwin T. Turner, ed. *The Wayward and the Seeking: A Collection of Writings by Jean Toomer* (1980)
* Robert B. Jones, ed. *Jean Toomer: Selected Essays and Literary Criticism*. (1996).
* Robert B. Jones and Margery Toomer Latimer, eds. *The Collected Poems of Jean Toomer* (1988)
* Frederick L. Rush, ed. *A Jean Toomer Reader: Selected Unpublished Writings* (1993)
* John Chandler Griffin, ed. The Uncollected Works of American Author Jean Toomer, 1894-1967 (2003).

References and Further Reading

* Byrd, Rudolph, and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (2011). “‘Song of the Son’: The Emergence and Passing of Jean Toomer.” *Cane*, New Edition ed., New York: Liveright.
* Griffin, John Chandler (2002). *Biography of American Author Jean Toomer, 1894-1967*, Lewiston: Edwin Mellen.
* Kerman, Cynthia Earl, and Richard Eldridge (1987). *The Lives of Jean Toomer: A Hunger for Wholeness,* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP.
* O’Daniel, Therman (1988). *Jean Toomer: A Critical Evaluation*, Washington, D.C.: Howard UP.
* Scruggs, Charles, and Lee VanDemarr (1998): *Jean Toomer and the Terrors of American History,* Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P*.*

Links:

* The Jean Toomer Pages. U of Buffalo. <http://www.math.buffalo.edu/~sww/toomer/jean-toomer.html>
* Jean Toomer at the Poetry Foundation. <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/jean-toomer#poet>
* The New Georgia Encyclopedia <http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/nge/Article.jsp?id=h-1241>
* “Jean Toomer’s Conflicted Racial Identity.” *Chronicle of Higher Education* 6 Feb 2011. <http://chronicle.com/article/Jean-Toomers-Conflicted/126184/>
* Perspectives in American Literature <http://www.csustan.edu/english/reuben/pal/chap9/toomer.html>
* Modern American Poetry. U of Illinois. <http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/s_z/toomer/toomer.htm>