Cory Fosmire

Professor Clint Wilson

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The Gender Divide between Jacobs’ “*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl”* andToomer’s *“Cane”*

Harriet Jacobs and Jean Toomer both wrote significant and groundbreaking literary works about the plight of blacks in the American South, but these works differ fundamentally in many ways. Jacobs escaped slavery to the North, while Toomer came to the South to see it in his own eyes. Jacobs lived under de jure slavery, while in Toomer’s time, slavery was entirely de facto after the 14th Amendment to the Constitution. There are differences in the role of religion and morals, as Toomer’s anti-religious hostility clashes with Jacobs’ faith in Christian values to set her free. Even the form of the works are remarkably distinct, as Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is a true-to-life testimonial of a black slave’s experience while Toomer’s *Cane* is a modernist, surrealistic, and fictional portrayal of the cane fields of Georgia. However, none of these explain one of the most fundamental breaks in the two works: namely, the divide in the depiction of gender and sexuality. This divide, taking form in the attitudes in the texts towards violence, sexuality, and female subservience, must be understood as a reflection of the gender of the authors themselves, as both authors focus on issues personally relatable to themselves.

Violence is shown in two related but different ways in the two works: Jacobs writes frequently about rape and sexual abuse with a feminine sense of horrified compassion, while Toomer’s focus is on lynching, related in a matter-of-fact tone with very little emotion, reflecting a typically masculine toughness. Jacobs directly addresses the reader in the preface to *Incidents*, explaining that she writes because she wants “to arouse the women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two millions of women at the South” (Jacobs 5). Here, Jacobs uses specifically gendered language as she tries to stir sympathy for anti-slavery movements in the South, assuming that it is women who will have compassion for her plight, not the Northern men. This choice of the female audience recurs throughout the narrative, as Jacobs highlights sexual and physical violence against women as well as maternal sorrow for slain children and husbands. She states directly that when a girl turns fourteen, she is “whipped or starved into submission” (Jacobs 44) to the will of the white men who covet her body, and tells of a slaveholder who “shot a woman through the head” (Jacobs 43), hoping to infuriate her chiefly female audience at these atrocities. She also appeals to a maternal feeling, asking how one mother’s “affectionate heart would bear the news” of her son’s murder (Jacobs 42). By contrast, Toomer seems to obey the observation that “the institutionalized rape of black women has never been as powerful a symbol of black oppression as the spectacle of lynching” (Hopkins 4) in his focus on violence and murder of mostly male characters, delivered with scarcely a trace of compassion. While Kabnis, Layman, and Halsey discuss current events, Halsey references lynching and murder while laughing twice then grins while “feeling like having a little fun with Kabnis” (Toomer 122), showing a masculine ideal of steadiness, unaffected by the horrors. This lack of visible compassion continues as Layman tells of two flagrantly cruel atrocities, which are punctuated by a scream coming from none of the men present, but a woman attending church nearby. Toomer’s perspective seems bound by gender norms that say a man should not be emotional or easily shaken. Interestingly, there is no mention of any rape or sexual harassment, a departure from Jacobs’ focus, although Toomer does mention a female character who is murdered. From Toomer’s male-centric perspective, the most crucial and shocking display of Southern barbarism is physical violence, which takes center stage and leaves any female-specific concerns in the shadows. In fact, Toomer almost never acknowledges any female concern in *Cane*, while Jacobs details sympathetic female perspectives throughout her narrative.

Jacobs’ *Incidents* contains an abundance of important female characters with independent motives and thoughts, while Toomer’s longest work in *Cane*, “Kabnis,” portrays women exclusively as servants to men, representing a focus on characters of each author’s gender. Jacobs describes several women with notable levels of agency, almost all of whom are sympathetic characters in *Incidents*. Certainly, the narrator Linda Brendt cannot be ignored, as her perspective is found quite literally on every single page, as she takes her life into her own hands and escapes Dr. Flint’s advances and slavery through her cunning and dedication. Her beliefs and motivations are entirely her own, notably not shaped by any male character. Brendt even goes as far as to disregard her own grandmother’s hysterical pleas that she stay or she will “kill [her] old grandmother” (Jacobs 75). Here, Brendt decides to flee despite the objections of the person she loves most, an indication of her strong, independent will. For her part, Brendt’s grandmother lives alone, without a husband, and ably defends Brendt from Dr. Flint’s systematic pattern of sexual coercion. She is so able that as she enters the house, Dr. Flint “hurrie[s] out” (Jacobs 65), afraid of this old woman’s rage. A third example of a motivated woman is Mrs. Bruce, a British lady who employs Brendt as a nurse for her children. Mrs. Bruce is perhaps the kindest character in the novel, as she shields Brendt from the Fugitive Slave Act at her own peril and eventually buys Brendt’s freedom. She, too, achieves significant victories despite her role as a female in a patriarchal society, and does so with compassion and dignity. Strong female characters such as these are strikingly absent from Toomer’s “Kabnis”*,* as all women exist as servants or diversions for men. Yolanda Manora rightly comments that “black female subjectivity, as read through the black maternal feminine, is sacrificed, negated” (56) in “Kabnis,” as indeed no female characters voice thoughts and desires, except to serve men. Carrie K. simply delivers lunch to Kabnis and Halsey and attends to her aging father, while Stella and Cora, the only other females, seem to be little more than prostitutes. While never explicitly stated, it is hard to read Stella and Cora as anything other than prostitutes as Cora, notably on Halsey’s command, throws her body onto Kabnis and even ignores his attempted resistance. Stella at this point does show some self-directed desire, but in this case the desire is only to replace Cora as Kabnis’ consort, which is to make herself an object of pleasure for a man. This “negation” of female subjectivity is almost the polar opposite of Jacobs’ agentic women, a divide not adequately explained by either time or distance. Both authors emphasize the role of their own gender in their works and mostly do not deal with the opposite genders’ emotions and experiences. This divide persists even when characters of both genders interact romantically and sexually.

Toomer’s and Jacobs’ depict sexuality and motherhood with strikingly different perspectives. *Cane* contains no mothers and chiefly repressed desires and unfulfilling sexual encounters, while *Incidents* places motherhood front and center and describes a puritanical societal view of sexuality complicated by Brendt’s actions. Brendt lives near her grandmother as she hides from Dr. Flint, where her grandmother can shield her from slavecatchers, showing a maternal protectiveness. Brendt herself feels a similar maternal bond with her two children, as she works tirelessly to free them from Dr. Flint’s clutches, and then to protect them from their new masters until Mrs. Bruce finally buys all of their freedoms. Brendt to a lesser degree bonds with Mrs. Bruce’s child, as she nurses the girl and takes her to England to visit her relatives, always accompanying her. This is something of a synthetic motherhood, but Brendt retains the feelings of compassion and dedication typical of motherhood as well. Somewhat more thorny is the question of sexuality in *Incidents*. After Brendt becomes pregnant for the first time, her grandmother acts disgusted after hearing accusations brought by Brendt’s mistress:

My grandmother, whose suspicions had been previously awakened, believed what she said. She exclaimed, "O Linda! has it come to this? I had rather see you dead than to see you as you now are. You are a disgrace to your dead mother." She tore from my fingers my mother’s wedding ring and her silver thimble. "Go away!" she exclaimed, "and never come to my house, again." (Jacobs 48)

Brendt’s pregnancy is a result of what Hopkins suggests is a “desperate act for … her life and the lives of her unborn children” (8) that effectively means Mr. Sands, the father of the child, raped Brendt. While it is very unclear that Brendt was raped, since she chose and consented to Mr. Sands in part as a strategic move in her escape from Dr. Flint’s harassment, Brendt’s grandmother acts with little compassion for or understanding of Brendt’s situation. She instead blindly adheres to a societal expectation that “asserted that womanly virtue resided in piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity” (Hopkins 12), which leads her to turn on her own grandchild. It is especially important that Brendt’s extramarital sexual encounters cause her grandmother to remove from Brendt’s hand symbols of purity (“my mother’s wedding ring”) and domesticity (“her silver thimble”). Here, Brendt’s grandmother views extramarital sexuality as so sinful that regardless of her granddaughter’s extreme hardships, she is rendered worthless. While the two eventually reconcile, the instinctive reaction should not be ignored. However, Brendt does still feel a strong desire to marry a carpenter who she “loved with all the ardor of a young girl’s first love” (Jacobs 33), showing she retains notions of sincere affection and domesticity. *Incidents* shows perversions of romance, sex and motherhood, but Brendt still unshakeably follows traditionally feminine attitudes towards both. *Cane*, on the other hand, almost exclusively portrays loveless extramarital sexuality, while hardly mentioning any mothers. These ideas are intertwined throughout many short stories in *Cane.*  The titular protagonist of the first story in *Cane*, “Karintha,” “indulges [her suitors] when she has the time for it” and is “married many times” (Toomer 4), suggesting a sexual licentiousness and disregard for domesticity and maternity. More explicitly, the titular “Fern” has eyes “that give the impression that nothing is to be denied” and says “a few men took her but got no joy from her” (Toomer 21), again devaluing sex as a physical act presupposing no emotional connection. In Kabnis, as well as the aforementioned prostitutes, Toomer writes about another woman who represses her desire. Carrie K. and Lewis establish a romantic connection that she breaks off:

The sunburst 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. (140)

This expression of love, one of the only in the entire work, comes from a woman, but crucially she idolizes (“haloes”, “Christ-eyes”) her love interest, likely indicative that she believes herself Lewis’ inferior. She is certainly not the equal of Christ, and thus would hardly feel the equal of her love, caving to submission at best. Again, the two authors diverge along gender lines, this time in their depiction of sex and maternity. *Incidents* reflects a feminine desire for domesticity, love, and maternity, while *Cane* mirrors a masculine obsession with sexual intercourse and primacy in relationships.

That *Cane* and *Incidents* so profoundly diverge along gender lines is itself interesting, but it attains a new degree of significance when one compares it to all the other differences between the works. The historical gulf between the two works, the economic and social position of the authors, and the literary movements or lack thereof they belong to do little to frame the extreme gender differences between the works. Casually, a reader might expect that the end of legal slavery in the United States, an especially momentous and era-defining event, would shape *Cane* and *Incidents* much more than the gender of the authors, but this is not the case. Soberingly, these works reveal the outsize impact and influence of gender and gender roles in the creation of meaning through literature. Hundreds of years, thousands of miles, significant literary and cultural movements: all of these pale in comparison to a difference much simpler, a difference they had no control over, and a difference fundamental to each human, namely, which biological sex they were born as.

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