



# Jean Toomer and the Terrors of American History

*Charles Scruggs, Lee VanDemarr*

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Jean Toomer's *Cane* was the first major text of the Harlem Renaissance and the first important modernist text by an African-American writer. It powerfully depicts the terror in the history of American race relations, a public world of lynchings, race riots, and Jim Crow, and a private world of internalized conflict over identity and race which mirrored struggles in the culture at large. Toomer's own life reflected that internal conflict, and he has been an ambiguous figure in literary history, an author who wrote a text that had a tremendous impact on African American authors but who eventually tried to distance himself from *Cane* and from his identification as a black writer.

In *Jean Toomer and the Terrors of American History*, Charles Scruggs and Lee VanDemarr examine original sources—Toomer's rediscovered early writings on politics and race, his extensive correspondence with Waldo Frank, and unpublished portions of his autobiographies—to show how the cultural wars of the 1920s influenced the shaping of Toomer's book and his subsequent efforts to escape the racial definitions of American society. That those definitions remain crucial for American society even today is one reason Toomer's work continues to fascinate and to influence contemporary writers and readers.

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