

Early Twentieth-Century Fiction
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a word on words

In the United States, it is the most loaded word one can utter, it is the nuclear weapon of racial epithets. There is no other word that comes even close in its explosive power. It is always insulting when said by a non-Black. It is the word that is linked with degradation and violence. It is the word linked to lynching and murder as in “die n—.” It is the word White people use today when they want to wound Black people.

Pamela Oliver, “[Race Names](#),” September 16, 2017, *Race, Politics, Justice*, www.ssc.wisc.edu/soc/racepoliticsjustice.

discussion: linkages

- ▶ Find a few points of contact between different sections of *Cane*.
- ▶ How do these linkages make meaning? What kind of context is the whole of *Cane* for each individual part?

Paul follows the sun, over the stock-yards where a fresh stench is just arising, across wheat lands that are still waving above their stubble, into the sun. Paul follows the sun to a pine-matted hillock in Georgia. He sees the slanting roofs of gray unpainted cabins tinted lavender. A Negress chants a lullaby beneath the mate-eyes of a southern planter. Her breasts are ample for the suckling of a song. She weans it, and sends it, curiously weaving, among lush melodies of cane and corn. Paul follows the sun into himself in Chicago. (“Bona and Paul,” 96)

review: hopes (false and real)

Hanby: Professor Kabnis, to come straight to the point: the progress of the Negro race is jeopardized whenever the personal habits and examples set by its guides and mentors fall below the acknowledged and hard-won standard of its average member. (“Kabnis,” 128)

Kabnis, a promise of a soil-soaked beauty; uprooted, thinning out. Suspended a few feet above the soil whose touch would resurrect him. Arm's length removed from him whose will to help. . . ("Kabnis," 132)

blockage

I started to hum a folk-tune. She slipped her hand in mine. Pillowed her head as best she could upon my arm. Kissed the hand that was holding and listened, or so I thought, to what I had to say. I traced my development from the early days up to the present time, the phase in which I could understand her. I described her own nature and temperament. Told how they needed a larger life for their expression. How incapable Washington was of understanding that need.... I talked, beautifully I thought, about an art that would be born, an art that would open the way for women the likes of her. I asked her to hope, and build up an inner life against the coming of that day. I recited some of my own things to her.... Then I looked at Avey. Her heavy eyes were closed. ("Avey," 63)

encounter

He sees the Gardens purple, as if he were way off. And a spot is in the purple. The spot comes furiously towards him. Face of the black man. It leers. It smiles sweetly like a child's....

“I came back to tell you, to shake your hand, and tell you that you are wrong. That something beautiful is going to happen.”

(“Bona and Paul,” 106)

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Discussion

What is the significance of this encounter? What kinds of beauty are imagined here? Use particular words of the passage, and think about the context within the story and the book.

the color purple

“All the while the Gardens were purple like a bed of roses would be at dusk. I came back to tell you, brother, that white faces are petals of roses. That dark faces are petals of dusk. That I am going out and gather petals.”
(107)

beauty and violence

Hair—braided chestnut,
 coiled like the lyncher's rope,
Eyes—fagots,
Lips—old scars, or the first red blisters,
Breath—the last sweet scent of cane,
And her slim body, white as the ash
 of black flesh after flame.

“Portrait in Georgia,” 38

next

- ▶ Hurston, *Their Eyes*, at least to 99.
- ▶ Commonplace; additional writing on your passage due Weds.