

The Hunter and the Farmer: Jean Toomer's Model of Masculinity

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The novelist Jean Toomer (1894–1967) saw masculinity as universal and biologically determined. To him, white or black masculinity did not matter, since he was convinced, by the point he began to theorize masculinity and femininity in earnest, that there were no Negro or white races but simply, as he put it, an “American” race.¹ Therefore, he theorized “American” masculinity, and even global masculinity.² The responsibilities of masculinity included making sure that appropriate gender roles governed relations between men and women.

This explains why race is a very loud silence in Toomer's writing about men's and women's roles. He falls back upon reductive theories about men and women and does not take gender socialization into account. To him, gender, unlike race, was not at all fluid and changeable. Like a scientist, he attempted to experiment and observe in order to discern men's and women's roles, denying the possibility of ideas and opinions having anything to do with his theories. But, as I will show, race did matter to his conceptions; his loud silence on the subject betrays its importance. Racial anxieties interlocked with gender anxieties, because at the time of Toomer's most concentrated writing about masculinity and femininity, he was living in a community in which his race was a constant undertone to his relationships with his friends and neighbors. Rather than turning to racial thinking and writing, however, he turned to questions of power and control along gender lines.

That masculinity that Toomer saw was fairly reductive, even for his time: men as hunters, providers, more rational, more intellectual. Women, in his opinion, were domestic, subservient, irrational, and had lower critical faculties than men. A major problem he saw, however, was the fact that women seemed to be attempting to break out of these roles, something that was detrimental to society.

We know about Toomer's model not from his published writings but from the unpublished works that he undertook in the late 1920s and 1930s. Some of these were not intended for publishing, such as his letters and diaries. Others were explicitly intended for publication, although they never saw the light of print. In particular, Toomer envisioned himself as working on a big book that would be a memoir and extended meditation on human nature. He was hard at work on this in the later 1930s, after he had married his second wife and moved her, his young daughter from a first marriage, and various family friends and followers to a farm in Doylestown, Pennsylvania.³

Why Did He Create a Model?

Toomer's motives in creating his model have not survived in an explicit form, but his context suggests possible reasons. For one, as I have mentioned, he was living in a world where race was essentialized, a subtext to all human relationships, and an ever-present silence in his life. Gender, however, was something that he could discuss without fear of upsetting his constructed life. Indeed, theorizing gender allowed him to justify his position of leadership in a family in which he held no economic power.

Second, Toomer had been obsessed with gender for many years. Even casual readers of *Cane* will notice his essentialized, exoticized portraits of women characters.⁴ Furthermore, an epiphany Toomer had while crossing the Atlantic on his way to France was what he called the “ideal of the patriarch,” a vision of the destiny toward which his nature pulled him. This was the role of patriarch in a family.⁵ Thus, his own spiritual self-image was very contingent on ideas of masculinity in a particularly explicit way.

Third, Toomer saw himself as an expert of sorts on gender. In some ways, he was ahead of his time, expressing interest in early forms of family therapy and models of communal learning. In fact, when his first wife, Margery Latimer Toomer, died after childbirth, her obituary noted that she was the wife of “psychologist” Jean Toomer. He led numerous Gurdjieffian philosophy and psychology groups and had a lifelong interest in psychological theories. He documented at least one occasion where he acted as couples therapist to some friends of his, and paramount in his analysis of their situation was his emphasis that their gender differences, or rather their oblivion to them, was responsible for their marital strife.

Enactments of Race and Gender in Toomer’s Personal Life

Toomer’s model was reflective of generalized gender anxiety—both in the time that Toomer was writing and as a product of his own personal experiences. Toomer created his model based on his family history, his racial experiences, and his exposure to philosophical and psychological thought. It was also a product of his historical moment. Toomer’s intellectual coming of age occurred during the era of the New Woman, when increasing demands for women’s autonomy and authority met opposing ideas and calls for more restrictive roles for women.

Nathan Pinchback Toomer, as Jean Toomer was first named, was born and raised in the patriarchal household of his maternal grandfather, Pinckney Benton Stewart Pinchback. It was a solid upper-middle-class home that emphasized ideals of racial uplift, morality, and respectability. He lived under Pinchback’s roof for many years, first because Toomer’s father deserted his mother, and then when his mother died of appendicitis in 1909, when Toomer was fifteen.⁶ Pinchback is a famous figure in African-American history, having been the Reconstruction-era governor of Louisiana for two months, a Louisiana state senator, and a United States senator (he was elected but not admitted). Pinchback was so light that he could pass for white, but he chose not to and instead participated in elite African-American social and political circles. The Pinchback family lived in a predominantly white neighborhood in Washington, D.C.⁷ Pinchback was domineering, and Toomer disliked this. As an adult he would liken his upbringing to a “strait-jacket of middle-class morality,” preferring the white bohemian and literary world to the black bourgeoisie one.⁸

Toomer’s father’s desertion was humiliating among the black bourgeoisie, (despite the fact that his family was not the only bourgeoisie family to experience a spouse’s desertion). Toomer’s father was Nathan Toomer, and his mother was P. B. S. Pinchback’s daughter Nina. P. B. S. Pinchback suspected that Nathan was only after the Pinchback money, of which there was little by that point. But Nina, enamored, married him anyway. Nina was twenty-six, and Nathan, past fifty, had already been married twice. At first, things went well: Nathan bought a house and put the deed in Nina’s name.

Nina became pregnant with Jean. Then Nathan disappeared. Nina had believed that he had the means to maintain a comfortable home, but after marrying she discovered his financial situation was not as he had represented it. He was away for long periods of time, including one occasion when Toomer was six weeks old and Nina was simultaneously quite ill. Nathan gave his family no financial support. Nina tried accepting the situation, found she could not, and demanded a divorce. She and her young son moved back into her father's house, where Pinchback became Toomer's surrogate father.⁹ According to the family lore, Nathan had indeed married Nina for her money and then deserted her when he realized that there was no Pinchback fortune.¹⁰ Regardless of the true circumstances of his father's departure, young Toomer would have been aware that this was a humiliating experience for his family.

Toomer led a peripatetic existence in the 1910s, completing his secondary education and dabbling in higher education. While finishing high school, he lived in a black neighborhood for the first time, one that was filled with members of Washington's substantial black middle class. He attended the respected M Street High school (later the Paul Laurence Dunbar High School). After graduating, he attended the University of Wisconsin for less than a year, then the Massachusetts College of Agriculture at Amherst, and then the American College of Physical Training in Chicago, where he also took classes at the University of Chicago. In Chicago, which he reached in 1916, he began reading Herbert Spencer. In a foreshadowing of his gendered ideas to come, he delivered a lecture entitled "The Intelligence of Women," which so offended his audience, including the Dean of Women, that he was forced to stop speaking.¹¹ He left Chicago for Washington, D.C., and New York, where he took a final set of classes at New York University and the City College of New York.

A period of racial soul-searching and ambivalence led him to start writing in 1920. He began to call himself "American," explaining that he gained much artistic inspiration from his connections to an African-American world, but that his own racial identity was fluid. At this point, he still spent time with black people. In fact, the major events of his personal life took place in the black summer resort of Harpers Ferry, where twenty-eight-year-old Toomer fell in love with a young girl of sixteen, Mae Wright. A surviving letter to her concerns African-American beauty and warnings of an "Anglo-Saxon ideal." White ideals of beauty, plus the pursuit of material gain for its own sake, easily overshadowed the equally beautiful appearances, minds, and emotions of black people. Unfortunately, he felt, African Americans themselves (and here he referred to the black bourgeoisie who summered in Harpers Ferry) perpetrated the worst insults against black people's aesthetics. Because she was one of the few people "whom [he] can touch in a personal way," and because of his own "unique racial and social status," Toomer saw it as his "privilege and duty" to teach her how to construct her own self-image that did not adopt white beauty standards.¹² Although Toomer sent an impassioned letter to Mae's parents, requesting their permission to court her, no further evidence of their relationship's continuation exists. After Mae, he would give up black women.

Toomer's most formative experience as a writer occurred in 1921. He spent several months in Sparta, Georgia, that summer, as an acting head of a black agricultural and industrial institute. He returned full of language describing his experience and wrote much of what would become his famous novel, *Cane* (1923), on the train back north at the end of his stay. It was, however, one of the last times that he would immerse himself

in African-American life. *Cane* became both Toomer's greatest success and the scourge of his attempt to live an unraced life. Selling modestly but critically acclaimed, *Cane* inaugurated the Harlem Renaissance, the flourishing of African-American artistic and literary production in New York in the 1920s. After a reissue and revival in the 1960s, it is now one of the most famous novels by a black writer. Ironically, the man credited as an example of supreme African-American literary achievement was ambivalent about his racial identity. At this point he increasingly saw his black heritage as only one of several ethnic and racial threads in his ancestry. Not long after *Cane* was published, Toomer left behind the African-American literary world for the much whiter one of the Greek-Armenian mystic and psychologist Georges Gurdjieff. Toomer tried his best to distance himself from his black ancestry. He would list himself as white on his marriage certificate in 1931, and he refused to contribute to Nancy Cunard's forthcoming anthology of African-American literature, explaining that he was not black.¹³

Turning away from *Cane* and the racial identity that Toomer felt had been imposed upon him, Jean became consumed with two things: Gurdjieffian philosophy and a series of women. He had fallen in love with his literary mentor's wife, with whom he carried on a torrid affair. She was the one who told him about Gurdjieff and his institute for human development in Fontainebleau, France. Gurdjieff taught that most humans existed in a kind of sleep, and that it took work, often menial labor, to become alive and aware. Perhaps Gurdjieff's philosophy appealed to Toomer because, at the time he published *Cane*, Toomer was very much a divided person and Gurdjieff's philosophy promised wholeness.¹⁴

For the next ten years, Toomer remained involved in Gurdjieff's world, traveling to France several times, learning, participating, and eventually teaching. In so doing, he left behind the Harlem Renaissance and, some have argued, his creative inspiration.¹⁵ He also acquired many of the ideas that he would use to justify his superiority as a man to women. Toomer took it upon himself to teach others about Gurdjieff's work, especially the women he was involved with.¹⁶ Teaching made use of Toomer's natural charisma and magnetic personality and brought an abundance of female admirers. In 1926 he established Gurdjieff study groups in Harlem (which failed to attract much interest) and then moved to Chicago (where he attracted a largely white following for his groups). He lived on fees and donations from the study groups.¹⁷

In the summer of 1929, Toomer had an epiphany: all of his feelings and goals were related to the "ideal of the patriarch." He realized all of his efforts and the pull of his very nature was toward becoming the patriarch of a family.¹⁸ He began to fantasize about leading a life where he had both financial security and a wife to shelter within it. He wrote about his romantic prospects in his journals as he traveled to and from France to visit Gurdjieff. Worriedly weighing his options, he concluded that casual affairs did not satisfy his considerable sexual appetite. Having conducted three such affairs in two months, he was frustrated with periods of sexual feast and famine. The man, in his opinion, needed a steady diet of sexual release. The combination of sexual needs and the ideal of the patriarch led Toomer to the solution of marriage. He conceived of marriage as an undeniable need, because "my nature desires it."¹⁹

After at least one more ill-fated relationship, Toomer met a woman he hoped could help him live out his dream of patriarchal marriage, Margery Latimer. Also a writer, Margery was white and immersed in New York bohemian culture.²⁰ The two

spent the summer of 1931 together in a communal living experience that she organized and Toomer led, in Portage, Illinois. The stated purpose of the experiment was to dismantle the false restrictions of civilization and to allow the residents to exist in a more elemental authentic state. Toomer's secondary project was Margery's improvement and remodeling. Her insecure, emotional personality contributed to her willingness as a pupil and her trusting surrender to Toomer.²¹

Toomer and Margery's ensuing marriage was tragically short. Not long after the new couple arrived at their chosen home of Carlsbad, California, Toomer's racial identity caught up with him. A reporter published a sensationalized account of the Toomers' marriage, exposing the fact that it was interracial and that the two had been involved in a so-called free love commune in Portage.²² The local papers in California and in the Midwest reported the scandal extensively, and even *Time* magazine sent a reporter to investigate. The Toomers received hate mail and racist literature, and Margery's parents were forced to leave their home in Portage for a time to escape the furor. Then Margery died giving birth to the couple's first child.

Toomer's response to single fatherhood illustrates much about his views of men's roles within families. It simply never occurred to him that he could take care of his baby daughter (also named Margery) without a wife in his household. He (temporarily) abdicated his role as a father for Margery, and he left her with friends in Chicago. Although heartbroken over the loss of his wife, he seemed to take no comfort in the company of his daughter. What Toomer assumed was necessary to any would-be patriarch was a wife, not just a child. The child merely acted as an extension of a wife. Therefore, his first attempt to realize his "ideal of the patriarch" had been ruined both by the re-emergence of his racial past and his wife's death.

He was unhappily wandering between the Midwest and the East Coast when he met his second wife, Marjorie Content, in 1934. She was the daughter of a wealthy Jewish banker in New York.²³ The bohemian world of New York artists, intellectuals, and writers was familiar to both Toomers, and it was through this network that they met in 1934. Importantly, when they each had entered this world over a decade before, its male members had been consumed with the iconography and ideal of the New Woman while subtly preserving male privilege. A darker side of male anxiety to keep their needs foremost had accompanied the exhilaration of the birth control movement, women's suffrage, and women's economic independence. Despite the increasing power of feminism, women were still expected to subordinate their own independence to care of their husbands and children at home. New Womanhood did not yet possess a language to critique the ideal of domesticity; the spirit of adventure and innovation typically did not extend to leaving this ideal behind.²⁴ Jean took this pattern to heart, cherishing the ideal of domesticity. Unlike his fellow bohemian men, however, he openly disdained female autonomy.

Letters that the couple exchanged while Marjorie was on a trip show the degree of Toomer's difficulty with his then-fiancée's autonomy. Her absence seemed to trigger a feeling that his masculinity was being slighted. He wrote at one point after Marjorie's last-minute change in itinerary caused a lapse in communication between the two: "I have, I've found, curious, deep male feelings about my woman going out of my immediate world. Those feelings were doubtless at the base of my concern when I didn't get a wire from you Sunday night." In a letter following that one, he described his feeling

of powerlessness, saying that when he thought she might be injured and he had no way of being there to help her, he “felt as if a whole continent were sinking in me, a bright full world sinking into something I could not see”²⁵ Toomer’s connection of losing contact Marjorie with his failure as a man seems palpable. As Patricia Hill Collins has pointed out, African-American men’s ability to protect women is highly valued. However, this ability to protect has become dependent on black women’s willingness to be protected—and the line “between *protecting* Black women and *controlling* them” becomes blurred. Marjorie, it seems, stepped over this line when she neglected to check in with Toomer quickly enough.²⁶

Believing himself to have the prerogative to do so, Toomer analyzed Marjorie’s behavior in a patronizing manner. Marjorie’s failure to communicate with him indicated, in his eyes, that she needed psychological intervention. Her “self” was “enclosed and covered,” and he thought that she acted as if she were under an anesthetic at all times. Echoing Gurdjieff, he theorized that some childhood trauma had somehow “knocked [her] to sleep.” And he thought that this would explain why Marjorie was not truly conscious of her actions and let “things slip and slip by.” A prime example of this was how she “went asleep in part of [herself] after reaching Taos [where she failed to send him a telegram].” On the other hand, he noted, she was at times awake and vibrant, and all she had to do now was to bring her asleep and awake sides together. In order to do this, he prescribed two things: self-expression through writing, and increasing the use of the mind and ideas.²⁷

Here, however, Toomer cautioned Marjorie to avoid jeopardizing her womanhood. He thought that she would never be or should not be intellectual, because that would go against her “feminine intuitive type.” It was more important for Marjorie to keep her “womanness” than to “give [herself] to the world.” He warned her that too many contemporary women were becoming too individualized and losing the “specialness” and “privateness” that women should have. This resulted in the extreme condition, in his view, of women being able to do everything, and men being unable to do anything for them. This destroyed the base of human life, which, Jean thought, was the “right relation between man and woman.”

Toomer’s implication was that women should be happy within a domestic life where a husband was the sole decision-maker. His expectations of his new wife reflected this, even though she owned the house that they occupied and her father’s money was the couple’s only source of income. Once he was married again, Toomer wanted his daughter with him. He collected his now two-year-old daughter from her interim custodians. The two newlyweds were faced with a child who was nearly a stranger to them both, but they tried to behave as though they had all been together for years. “Argie” (Margery Latimer Toomer) was to call Marjorie “Mother”; and Marjorie was to act as Argie’s primary caretaker. Not long after moving to New York, Toomer agreed to take in another child who was the son of a onetime lover, without Marjorie’s approval. The care of both children fell to Marjorie, who had already raised two children of her own. She assigned their chores, supervised their baths, and ran the kitchen, sometimes with hired help. Marjorie resented the new addition. She was fairly accepting of her responsibilities as the (step)mother of Jean’s child but not of his former lover’s son (although he was not Toomer’s child).²⁸

Toomer as Gender Theorist

Toomer used not only his own but others' relationships as a laboratory to test his theories. He applied and theorized the essential natures of men and women in his psychological work. In a foray into couples therapy, Jean based his diagnosis and treatment on these so-called natural roles. He told his friends Charles "Chaunce" and Katherine "Tockie" Dupee, that much marital conflict could be solved if only men and women understood their differences and did not see their partners as intentionally obtuse. Men and women simply failed to understand each other's basic natures. He set about showing this dynamic to the couple. First, "I explained to Tockie what the male-nature, the man-nature, wants to do for his woman—and what happens to man when the abnormalities of life cut across and violate this want. Her eyes opened. I saw her looking at Chaunce [sic] as if she had never before seen, certainly never understood many things about him before. I could see something happening in her. Then I told Chaunce what the female-nature, the woman-nature wants to do for her man, how she wants to live—and what happens to woman when the abnormalities of life cut across and violate this want." It seems that Chaunce was unemployed after unsuccessfully trying to sell insurance, but Tockie was still employed and faced with returning home each day to her demoralized husband. The "wants" Toomer described, therefore, were Chaunce's to escape the feeling that "he wasn't doing enough for Tockie" and for Tockie to stop doing too much for herself.

Toomer's advice showed that on some level he believed in both men's and women's needs to develop their whole selves. This he called "individualization." He contrasted this with the wrongheaded idea of "independence." Independence was an impossibility because of humans' natural interdependence on one another; and to attempt to achieve independence was both futile and wrong. Individualization, on the other hand, was the continuing process of growth and the fulfillment of life's possibilities. Both men and women should strive for this individualization and, importantly, in a relationship should encourage the other's individualization, which enriches the relationship and thereby each partner. Chaunce, therefore, should not be threatened by Tockie's paid job as a social worker, as long as Tockie respected his masculine needs.²⁹ Jean clearly took much pleasure in solving this sort of problem, and he found the winning results reassuring. Success in this case corroborated his conceptions of the roles of men and women.

Toomer's most concentrated writings on gender occurred after the couple moved their household to a farm in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, where they purchased a farmhouse using Marjorie's family money. At this time the area was known as an artists' and writers' haven and Toomer was intent on not just writing there but also undertaking a grand social experiment. This experiment was to follow the template of Gurdjieff's communal living and learning model from Fontainebleau, France, where Toomer had spent some months in the early 1920s. Enabled by his wife's father's cash, Toomer bought the farm, assigned everyone chores and set up an institute with grand ambitions for human development. By the fall of 1936, he had developed an educational program at the newly christened Mill House. This included physical labor, although Jean himself did not do much of this. He wrote all day. It was then that he wrote his most provocative gender theories. It was also at this time that Toomer lived, worshipped, and socialized

with mostly white people, but his racial identity remained unresolved and at times was a source of and undercurrent of discomfort.

Indeed, at Mill House Toomer's racial identity intensified as a source of anguish. Although the Toomers' interracial marriage aroused little overt hostility in Bucks County, there was some degree of racial anxiety in Doylestown. Neighbors found him mysterious and a bit suspicious, partly because of his ambiguous racial status. Many participated in a neighborhood fiction about Jean's race, maintaining the pretense that he was East Indian even when they knew better. Jean closed off racial inquiries by being deliberately opaque.³⁰

But internally, by the late 1940s, Toomer's racial confusion was almost unbearable. On racial matters, he wrote, "I am at peace with my neighbors, but not within myself." His journal manifests a long, monumental effort to keep his black and white worlds separate.³¹ This effort betrayed a fear of racial discovery and the energy required to keep up what felt like a fiction. If he was right, and his complicated feelings blocked him from writing, then they compounded his problem. If he could not write, as he had not for years, then perhaps he had no genius to justify Marjorie's physical and financial care of him, let alone his claims to the virtual patriarchy. Toomer probably feared that his racial identity would put him at risk for rejection—and rejection from Marjorie at this point would be devastating. He relied on her for all of his worldly and companionship needs.

In spite of, or perhaps because of, Toomer's ambiguous racial identity and anguish over this, Toomer sought absolute control over the intellectual lives of the Mill House residents. He used his writings as a sort of daily lesson plan. After his daily writing sessions, he would gather the group around him for late-afternoon dialogue salons. Whoever was there was required to read his pages and write out a response. This evolved into lectures by Toomer, seminars, and assignments on Jean's ideas. At the very least, everyone would be expected to comment on what he had written. In this way, the writings about masculinity and femininity, which were part of a larger body of writing at the time, were intended to be objects of group discussion and, later, public consumption.³²

Many of the ideas concerned the enactment of patriarchy. He wrote so much about this subject at this time that it appears his new marriage to the independently wealthy Marjorie spurred him to justify his position of leadership within it. During a period of prolific writing between 1935 and 1940, Jean wrote a substantial body of (unpublished) work on the meaning of marriage and appropriate relations between husband and wife. He was at work from 1935 to 1937 on two essays called "As the World Revolves" and "The Function of Man to Woman" that chiefly concerned relationships between men and women.

Jean went beyond his white bohemian peers and the gendered ideas of contemporary black scholars like W. E. B. Du Bois and E. Franklin Frazier. The other intellectual men took female domesticity and men's privileges for granted, while publicly celebrating women's suffrage and the New Woman. But Jean genuinely disliked women's political, sexual, and economic power and explicitly argued for male superiority. His ideas were frankly regressive. Using psychological, philosophical, physical, and spiritual arguments, he set out a rigid definition of patriarchy and compelling reasons why men were superior to women. The manuscript material reflects

his theories about the naturalness of men's and women's differences and the particular responsibility of men to maintain the proper balance of power between the sexes.

The draft fragments from "As the World Revolves" explore four themes: the essential natures of men and women, the problematic violations of this nature, distrust between men and women, and the purposes of marriage. Jean's beliefs about the distinct natures of men and women were encapsulated in a statement he handwrote on an otherwise blank sheet of paper: "Women are the allies of Nature. Men are the allies of God. Thus both God and Nature are represented in the human court."³³ This concept received a detailed exposition elsewhere in the manuscript.

In a section entitled "Men, Where Bound?" he theorized men as inherently creative, where women were limited to the basic biological desire to mate. Both body (women) and spirit (men) deserve recognition, though they were separate and manifested themselves in different sexes. Because women gave birth to children, they were made for "body-life," and though they might stray into the realm of the spirit and "taste intellect," their lives were dictated by their bodies. Men, on the other hand, were required by "Great Life" to function in the "spirit-life." As with women, they may wander into the life of the body. Therefore, both man and wife (and he does specify wife, rather than woman) live together, function in their own separate worlds, and join for "acts that require the union of two sexes."

In Toomer's opinion, modernity had unfortunately distorted these classic functions. For him, his bohemian peers' modern idea that man and woman could participate in each other's worlds led to much suffering. "Man" asked "woman" into his world, but woman did not really want to enter: she only pretended to and resented the pressure to feign interest in things "outside of her natural sphere." Likewise, man lacked the courage and the social support to tell woman he hates "being dragged into her affairs." This problem was man's fault, because he had designed lives based on material things devoid of spirituality or intellect. Woman was left with a life lived solely in the corporeal realm. This tragic error had led woman to become more powerful than man, and man feared that if he protested this state of affairs that woman would look to another man to satisfy her needs. Woman deplored the situation as well, because what she really wanted was to stop feigning enjoyment in science, intellect, and work outside the home. She suffered "because natural unions and natural divisions of labor have been abolished among the more 'advanced' members of Western Civilization," who marched under the "blind banner" of equal rights. These trends had introduced so much confusion, he believed, that society was headed far beyond widespread divorce and toward insanity.³⁴

Jean's second theme, distrust between men and women, was a problem because men and women had violated their essential natures in his contemporary world. Again, he placed the blame squarely on men's shoulders, explaining that all men recognized in each other a lack of honor and principle. Therefore, an atmosphere of suspicion existed among men, who knew that their fellow males would tempt their women to infidelity (Jean himself had betrayed at least one friend, Waldo Frank, by sleeping with his wife). Furthermore, men had developed a heightened sense of unpredictability in life. In a bald statement of his beliefs about men's and women's biologically determined sexual differences, he wrote, "Each man has been a dog more than once in this own life. Hence he suspects that more than once his wife will be a bitch."

This was not the only factor at work, however. Jean also blamed the birth control movement for this atmosphere of distrust. In his opinion, contraception deprived women of the discipline of childbearing. He mourned the loss of the sexual double standard, complaining that women were “now as free for vice as men.” He lamented, “They can fuck whom they want, and, at the end of each such assignation, do just as men, that is, wipe their organs, forget about it, and go on their way, untroubled by conscience, unworried by fear that their act of pleasure may have put a baby in their belly.” The absence of physical consequences for sex alarmed Jean, who thought that women had not yet had the chance to develop a sense of sexual morality, and that their “head-brains” might never be strong enough for self-control. Men, too, had not yet adjusted to the new situation of women’s sexual freedom. Distrust, therefore, was an inevitable result of the loss of biological incentives to fidelity.³⁵

The third theme, the purpose of marriage, was not the same for man and for woman. Jean believed that some common goals existed in marriage. For example, marriage advanced the journey toward self-knowledge. Partners became aware of their own psychological traits, both positive and negative, and of their own talents and abilities. Marriage’s other important features brought good things to spouses, including greater energy, a purpose, psychic integration, balance, and “a cosmos—within world-chaos.” It was important to Jean that these positive aspects of marriage brought out the best in each partner. The weight of mutually positive effects determined the fitness or unfitness of a particular marriage; a couple who brought out the worst in each other did not belong together. If beneficial effects predominated, then the two would meet in spirit, and if they met in spirit, they would meet as beings. This meant that the couple loved each other.³⁶

To the extent that the beneficence of marriage enriched the partners, the elements in successful marriage had the capacity to improve the world. This work in the world had a gendered division of labor. Jean thought that the husband had a special talent to work for a cause greater than the individuals in the marriage, a cause he termed “Impartial Work.” The wife was best at relating to other persons; she facilitated recreation and rest, or “Personal Life.” Men could motivate women to do Impartial Work, while women could motivate men toward creating Personal Life.³⁷ Each partner was grounded in their individual area of expertise, however. Men should get support from women in their worldly endeavors, and women should be led to self-improvement by men.

Toomer unveiled his most essentialized and reductive views of gender roles in a section entitled “The Hunter and the Farmer.” He explained that men possessed a basic impulse to hunt, and once men have hunted for and successfully caught a woman, they should turn their hunting, searching instinct into an endeavor of cultivation. Toomer believed marriage freed men from having to hunt for sex and could free their minds for higher pursuits. Presumably he thought that he was in that very situation of freedom. He theorized the married stage of men’s lives as analogous to farming, and he even went so far as to say that the transition from single to married was not unlike the transition from nomadic to agricultural society. As farmers, men should cultivate food, women, and the world.³⁸

Toomer’s role for women was misogynistic. Women, he wrote, “want men genuinely to be their lords and masters. They want to be taken—wholly even sometimes ruthlessly taken—and they want to be ruled.” Because men in the modern world are

failing at this, the result is that some women have been forced to take on male characteristics and have been fooled into thinking that they no longer want to be treated as women.³⁹ If, however, a woman is trained for marriage to a man occupied with the life of the mind (“a genius,” in Jean’s words), she will benefit. Jean thought that women possessed a “false self,” “individualism,” and “pride of independence” that blocked a deep relationship with her husband. If successfully trained, she would discover and overcome her own egotism, and thus develop healthfully as a woman.⁴⁰

He summed up his theories on the purpose of marriage as a household of “virtual patriarchy.” The man was to be the head, the woman was to be his helpmeet, and the man’s responsibility was to evoke certain “attitudes and feelings” in his wife and his children so as to foster the growth of all in the household. The man also “presides at the meal table,” and by this giving of actual food, he symbolizes more spiritual nourishment of his family.⁴¹ Man needed this authority in his family, and the consequences of failure were dire. Jean thought that man, faced with a lack of power at home, would be driven into the outside world to look for power; he would attempt tasks too advanced for him. The result would be widespread incompetence: not only ineffectual husbands and fathers, but also ineffectual leaders and statesmen.⁴² Woman could cause problems, too, by being too “individualized.” Such a woman had tremendous difficulty in locating an appropriate husband who was superior to her, so she was forced to choose either an inferior or younger man, and thereby set up a “virtual matriarchy.”⁴³ No less than the fate of society depended on patriarchy.

Toomer held rigid notions of masculine superiority. Toomer sought to leave nothing about gender identities to chance and devoted himself to enlisting psychological, natural, and spiritual arguments in support of his conviction that men should have power over women and children, including the power to dictate gender relations.

¹ See George Hutchinson, “Jean Toomer and American Racial Discourse” in *Interracialism: Black -White Intermarriage in American History, Literature, and Law*, ed. Werner Sollors (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 369–90.

² Many of his ideas about human nature came from Georges Gurdjieff, the Armenian spiritual leader who ran a school and commune in Fontainebleau, France, in the 1920s. Although Toomer broke with Gurdjieff in 1930, he remained fascinated by psychology and human nature. For more details about the intersection of Toomer’s literary work and Gurdjieff’s thought, see the excellent biography of Toomer by Nellie McKay, *Jean Toomer, Artist: A Study of His Literary Life and Work, 1894–1936* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 214–24. Jon Woodson takes this connection a step further by connecting Gurdjieff to more Harlem Renaissance writers in *To Make a New Race: Gurdjieff, Toomer, and the Harlem Renaissance* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999).

³ These writings are preserved in the Jean Toomer Papers in the James Weldon Johnson Collection at Beinecke Library, Yale University, hereafter referred to as Jean Toomer Papers.

⁴ See, for example, “Fern” and “Karintha,” chapters that accentuate women’s mysterious, sensuous qualities and deemphasize their agency. Jean Toomer, *Cane*, new ed. (New York: Norton, 1988).

⁵ Interestingly, this was in spite of (or perhaps because of) his resentment of his grandfather P. B. S. Pinchback’s restrictive role in his life. See Cynthia Kerman and Richard Eldridge, *The Lives of Jean Toomer: A Hunger for Wholeness* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), 16.

⁶ McKay, *Jean Toomer, Artist*, 14–15, 225.

⁷ Kerman and Eldridge, *The Lives of Jean Toomer*, p. 16; Charles R. Larson, *Invisible Darkness: Jean Toomer and Nella Larsen* (Des Moines: Iowa University Press, 1993), 170.

⁸ Jean Toomer, “Notation of Events,” March 28, 1950, Jean Toomer Papers, box 63, folder 1450.

⁹ Nina E. Pinchback Toomer to Nathan Toomer, July 8, 1897, Jean Toomer Papers, box 8, folder 262; Larson, *Invisible Darkness*, 172.

¹⁰ Larson, *Invisible Darkness*, 171–72.

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- ¹¹ Ibid., 178–81.
- ¹² Jean Toomer to Mae Wright, August 4, 1922; Jean Toomer to Mrs. Wright, August 16, 1922, Jean Toomer Papers, box 9, folder 283.
- ¹³ Larson, *Invisible Darkness*, 126, 130–33.
- ¹⁴ Ibid., 34.
- ¹⁵ Ibid., 39; McKay, *Jean Toomer, Artist*, 212–13.
- ¹⁶ “Gurdjieff, George Ivanovitch.” *Encyclopaedia Britannica* 2003, Encyclopaedia Britannica Online, March 1, 2003, <http://www.search.eb.com/eb/article?eu=39346>; Larson, *Invisible Darkness*, 34–38.
- ¹⁷ Larson, *Invisible Darkness*, 42–45; Kerman and Eldridge, *The Lives of Jean Toomer*, 170–72, 186.
- ¹⁸ Jean Toomer, January 4, 1930, Journals 1929–1930, Jean Toomer Papers, box 61, folder 1419.
- ¹⁹ Jean Toomer, undated entries, *ibid.*
- ²⁰ Margery Latimer to Laura Greshemer Chase, June 1931, Jean Toomer Papers, box 9, folder 296. See also Margery Latimer to Jane Comfort, May 1931, Jean Toomer Papers, box 9, folder 297; Margery Latimer to Shirley Grove, May 1931, Jean Toomer Papers, box 9, folder 305; and also Larson, *Invisible Darkness*, 122–24.
- ²¹ Larson, *Invisible Darkness*, 122–26; Kerman and Eldridge, *The Lives of Jean Toomer*, 194–96. Jean’s own account, quoted in both above sources, was called *Portage Potential* and can be found in the Jean Toomer Papers, box 35, folders 747–50. Quote from Margery Latimer’s journal, n.d., Jean Toomer Papers, box 66, folder 1512.
- ²² Margery Latimer to William and Karlton Kelm, June 18, 1932, Jean Toomer Papers, box 9, folder 309.
- ²³ Kerman and Eldridge, *The Lives of Jean Toomer*, 205–6; Jean Toomer form letter to friends, August 23, 1932, Jean Toomer Papers, box 8, folder 250.
- ²⁴ Christine Stansell, *American Moderns: Bohemian New York and the Creation of a New Century* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2000), 229, 231, 234, 245–46, 258.
- ²⁵ Jean Toomer to Marjorie Content, June 15 and 18, 1934, Jean Toomer Papers, box 8, folder 253.
- ²⁶ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2007), 156–57.
- ²⁷ Jean Toomer to Marjorie Content, June 20, 1934, Jean Toomer Papers, box 8, folder 254.
- ²⁸ Paul Beekman Taylor, *Shadows of Heaven: Gurdjieff and Toomer* (York Beach, ME: Samuel Weiser, 1998), 18, 23, 35, 219.
- ²⁹ This session is described in a letter from Jean Toomer to Marjorie Content, June 17, 1934, Jean Toomer Papers, box 8, folder 253.
- ³⁰ Taylor, *Shadows of Heaven*, 44–46; Larson, *Invisible Darkness*, 156.
- ³¹ Jean Toomer, “Notation of Events,” January 31, March 15, March 28, and April 5, 1950, Jean Toomer Papers, box 63, folders 1450, 1451.
- ³² Marjorie later expressed regrets about her accommodation to this plan, despite her reservations: “I made myself completely subservient.” Taylor, *Shadows of Heaven*, 219; Kerman and Eldridge, *The Lives of Jean Toomer*, 227–30.
- ³³ Jean Toomer, from “As the World Revolves” (1935–37), Jean Toomer Papers, box 24, folder 586.
- ³⁴ Jean Toomer, “Men, Where Bound?” from “As the World Revolves” (1935–37), Jean Toomer Papers, box 24, folder 584.
- ³⁵ Jean Toomer, “Women” and “The Bases of Modern Man’s Distrust of Modern Woman,” from “As the World Revolves,” Jean Toomer Papers, box 24, folder 582.
- ³⁶ Jean Toomer, “The Functions of Man to Woman, and Woman to Man, in Their Life Together” and untitled (“Each person has good, bad, and indifferent aspects”), Jean Toomer Papers, box 49, folder 1036.
- ³⁷ Jean Toomer, “One of the Functions of Marriage,” from “As the World Revolves,” Jean Toomer Papers, box 24, folder 582.
- ³⁸ Jean Toomer, “The Hunter and the Farmer,” n.d. (c. 1935–37), Jean Toomer Papers, box 49, folder 1036.
- ³⁹ Jean Toomer, “Lord and Master,” n.d. (c. 1935–37), Jean Toomer Papers, box 49, folder 1036.
- ⁴⁰ Jean Toomer, untitled draft fragment (“To train a woman to be the wife of a genius . . .”), n.d. (c. 1935–37), from “As the World Revolves,” Jean Toomer Papers, box 24, folder 586.
- ⁴¹ Jean Toomer, untitled draft fragment (“Man wants an establishment”), n.d. (1935–37), Jean Toomer Papers, box 49, folder 1036.
- ⁴² Jean Toomer, “Lord and Master,” n.d. (c. 1935–37), Jean Toomer Papers, box 49, folder 1036.

⁴³ Jean Toomer, untitled draft fragment (“Man wants an establishment”), n.d. (1935–37), Jean Toomer Papers, box 49, folder 1036. Toomer conceded, however, that where a woman had an unusually special talent, it was all right if she did possess a helpmate for a husband, because he could still “be of real service to her.”