



**Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro**  
Centro de Educação e Humanidades  
Instituto de Letras

Rafael Machado Guarischi

**A Study of three African-American works  
within their backgrounds**

Rio de Janeiro  
2010

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Rafael Machado Guarischi

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Dissertação apresentada como requisito parcial para obtenção do título de Mestre, ao Programa de Pós-Graduação em Letras da Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro. Área de Concentração: Literaturas de Língua Inglesa.

Orientadora: Prof<sup>ª</sup>. Dr<sup>ª</sup>. Maria Aparecida F. Andrade Salgueiro

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Aprovada em 22 de Março de 2010

Banca Examinadora:

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Prof. Dr. Antonio Dwayne Tillis  
Dartmouth College

Rio de Janeiro  
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To all the people who think they are less than other people – or those who are led to think this way.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Thanks God, Jesus, Ramatis and all my spiritual friends, for giving me the most important support that I needed;

Thanks to my family, for giving me another kind of support, also fundamental;

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Thanks also to all the teachers at school, because without them I wouldn't have arrived here;

Thanks to all the people who helped me and believed in me.

You are all very special to me. Thank you very much!

Let us not wallow in the valley of despair, I say to you today, my friends.

And so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

I have a dream today!

I have a dream that one day, down in Alabama, with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of "interposition" and "nullification" - one day right there in Alabama little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.

I have a dream today!

*Martin Luther King Jr.*  
*"I Have a Dream" (excerpt)*



## RESUMO

GUARISCHI, Rafael Machado. *A Study of Three African-American Works Within Their Backgrounds*. 2010. 98 f. Dissertação (Mestrado em Literaturas de Língua Inglesa) – Instituto de Letras, Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, 2010.

O objetivo desta dissertação é apresentar, discutir e analisar a relação que *Cane*, de Jean Toomer, *Dutchman*, de Amiri Baraka e *Playing in the Dark*, de Toni Morrison possuem com seus contextos no século XX em manifestações artísticas em três gêneros literários distintos. Após construir e delimitar o pano de fundo vivido pelos Afro-Americanos ao longo do século, pretendo analisar cada obra ao período em que foi escrita. Desta forma, a questão central de minha dissertação é como a Literatura produzida pelos Afro-Americanos (representada pelos três textos literários em pauta) dialoga com a realidade vivida por essas pessoas dentro da sociedade estadunidense ao longo do século XX, e como essa literatura funciona como um poderoso instrumento de expressão da ideologia, das questões raciais e dos sentimentos Afro-Americanos.

Palavras-chave: Literatura Afro-Americana. Cultura Afro-Americana. Estudos Culturais. Políticas Raciais. Ideologia.

## ABSTRACT

This dissertation intends to present, discuss and analyse the relation that *Cane* by Jean Toomer, *Dutchman* by Amiri Baraka, and *Playing in the Dark* by Toni Morrison, have with their backgrounds during the twentieth century in artistic manifestations of three distinct literary genders. After designing a background of the African-American people along that century, I intend to relate each of the three works to time in which they were written. This way, the central question of this dissertation is how the Literature produced by the African-Americans (represented by those three works) dialogues with the reality lived by those people within the US society during the twentieth century and how such literature works as an extremely important instrument of expression of the African-American feelings, racial concerns and ideology.

Keywords: African-American Literature. African-American Culture. Cultural Studies. Racial Politics. Ideology.

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## INTRODUCTION

First of all, I would like to thank Professors Peônia Guedes and Antonio Tillis for accepting my invitation, my advisor, Maria Aparecida Salgueiro, because without her I would not be here now, and all of you for coming here. Today is an extremely important day in my life. Since I decided to study English/Literature at the University, I have always had the objective to build an academic career. And even though I know that it would be very difficult and that I would have to work and study very hard, I decided to go for it. And here I am today, completing one more stage of my academic life.

So, it is important to state that this dissertation is the product of a long way in research. It is in fact a result not only of my work during my Masters Course, but also a consequence of my previous work in my Undergraduation, when I took part in the PIBIC program. I worked at this program for two years (from 2004 to 2006) and that work provided me with the foundations of the theories and authors that I have been working with. It also represented the first contact with my advisor. Throughout that period, I also had the chance to produce and present academic works of my own authorship and, actually, they served as a starting point for the ideas which I planned to develop in my dissertation.

Later on, all over my Masters Course I had the opportunity to go deeper into other theories and authors and have contact with other names that would also be relevant for me as far as my dissertation was concerned. Besides that, it is important to highlight that the chance to be in touch with Professors and students of different research lines, dealing with different theories and authors, and developing different projects, was also of great value for me, because they showed me some new perspectives and opened my mind to new theoretical points and aspects which I had not known before.

The main objective of the present work is to analyse the relation that African-American artistic manifestations represented by three different literary genres, namely *Cane* by Jean Toomer, *Dutchman* by LeRoi Jones, and *Playing in the Dark* by Toni Morrison, have with their contexts along different historical moments of the twentieth century. *Cane* was selected due to its aesthetical

richness concerning the description of vivid and detailed situations within the context of the Harlem Renaissance. *Dutchman* was chosen because of the debates it provokes, the controversial matters it represents, and still, because in this play the author depicts in a strong and harsh way the conflicts between blacks and whites during the Sixties. *Playing in the Dark* was selected since the theoretical points raised by Toni Morrison throughout the book are extremely pertinent and also because it provides an important reflexive material concerning the blacks not only within the American society, but also within American Literature, from the point of view of the late nineties.

However, I did not intend my dissertation to be simply a group of isolated analyses of different literary texts. As a matter of fact, I had the objective to construct the analysis of the literary texts in such a way that they formed *one single* analysis. In order to do so, I took into consideration some common denominators which served as the basis for my reflection upon the literary texts. This way, the main points of my analysis were *racial politics* and *ideology*. Actually, these two key-terms served as the core of my ideas throughout my dissertation. This way, I tried to reinforce in the three works the aspects in which each of them show or represent the African-American people, racially, politically and ideologically speaking.

Thus, the central question which I developed throughout my work was how the Literature produced by African-Americans (represented in this dissertation by these three works) dialogues with the reality lived by them within the US society during the twentieth century. Along with that, I also intended to show how this literature works as a powerful instrument of expression of the African-American feelings, concerns and ideology and how the most important questions related to that people can be clearly visible within these works.

I decided to work with this theme due to the growing importance that such Literature has achieved within the academic scenario and also because I have been working with this Literature for some years already and feel myself very involved with it. So, my idea was to develop and expand the topics I had the opportunity to study along my previous years of contact with African-American Literature.

It is important to mention that this dissertation presents an innovative point of view as far as the studies of African-American Literature are concerned among us, since it deals with different periods of African-American life by means of different literary genres. *Cane* is in fact a mix of poems, descriptions, short narratives and even drama. *Dutchman* is a strong and controversial play. *Playing in the Dark* is an essay with a deep critical tone. Dealing with different literary styles certainly represented a great challenge, but on the other hand, I understand it contributed to the enrichment of my dissertation, since it also called attention to another important and fundamental aspect of the literary texts: the aesthetic one. As I already mentioned before, the central aspects of my dissertation were racial politics and ideology, but it does not mean that I simply ignored or disregarded the other aspects of the literary texts.

This dissertation is divided in three chapters. In the first one, I worked with a theoretical basis composed basically of two branches: Cultural Studies and African-American Studies. Within the Cultural Studies, I worked mostly with the theory of Stuart Hall's concerning the postmodern subject and the one of Homi K. Bhabha's concerning the matter of oppression. I also made reference to some other authors, such as James Clifford and Paul Gilroy, due to their relevant studies concerning the black diasporic culture. Within African-American Studies, I worked mostly with Henry Louis Gates Jr., W.E.B. Du Bois, and Appiah. It is important to emphasize, though, that these two branches were not presented and developed in an isolated way, since they are intrinsically interconnected. Thus, in chapter 1 I intended to make the adequate articulations between the ideas presented, as well as introduce F. James Davis and his *Who Is Black? One Nation's Definition* and Charles W. Mills and his *Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race* as key and important authors to the understanding of linking element issues of race through artistic manifestations.

In the second chapter, I constructed a panorama of African-Americans as a people along the twentieth century in the United States. In order to do so, I divided the century into four parts and worked more specifically with each one of them, presenting their most meaningful events and names, so as to provide a reasonable idea of what the twentieth century represented to the African-American people. It is important to emphasize, though, that this division was

based on theoretical ideas of some of the aforementioned authors, mainly Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Appiah. Finally, I believe this division was necessary since it provided a better systematization of the century, which made it easier to understand the most relevant information that was dealt with along this part of the work.

In the third chapter, I worked more directly with the three authors and literary works that are the focus of my dissertation. In this part, I intended to work with each of them individually, making the most adequate and relevant associations between each literary work and the context in which they are inserted. As I mentioned before, in chapter 3 my analysis was engendered in terms of racial politics and ideology, so I focused mostly on these aspects of the literary texts. Thus, this chapter was a little less theoretical and more centered in the literary works themselves. However, the ideas developed all over it came as a consequence of the ones that were developed in the previous parts of the work. As a matter of fact, my real objective within this chapter was to analyze the way in which the African-American people, as well as their most important feelings, concerns and cultural elements are represented by the three literary works under study.

In sum, I highly expect that my dissertation became satisfactory, clear, organized and that the ideas developed all over it provided a relevant, comprehensive and critical view of the African-American experience, Literature and Art along the twentieth century.

## 1 – THEORETICAL DEPARTING POINT

It is possible to affirm that nowadays, in our current world, contemporary societies are extremely fragmented. This situation is caused greatly due to phenomena like globalization and a great number of migratory movements, which happen not only locally but also globally. Those phenomena are currently known as *diasporas*. According to James Clifford,

[d]iasporas usually presuppose longer distances and a separation more like exile: a constitutive taboo on return, or its postponement to a remote future. Diasporas also connect multiple communities of a dispersed population. (1997, p. 246)

This way, the concept of *diasporas* is now of a great importance for the study of the contemporary societies, since they end up generating different kinds of relations among multiple communities with different cultures. Still concerning diasporas, Bill Aschcroft defines them as ‘the voluntary or forcible movement of peoples from their homelands into new regions’ (1998, p. 68) and classifies them as “a central historical fact of colonization” (1998: 69). Furthermore, it is interesting to observe that “A intensificação de movimentos diaspóricos a partir da segunda metade do século XX, envolvendo o deslocamento de populações periféricas para os grandes centros, vem modificando a cartografia mundial.” (HARRIS, 2007, p. 49)<sup>1</sup>

This sort of complex situation has a strong and decisive influence upon this new subject, which should be analysed in contrast with the modern subject, also referred to as the *Cartesian subject* by Stuart Hall. In the words of this theorist, it would be defined as “... a fully centered, unified individual, endowed with the capacities of reason, consciousness, and action...” (1996, p. 597). Furthermore, according to Hall, the contemporary subject would have exactly the opposite features of the Cartesian subject, being mainly characterized by its

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<sup>1</sup> The intensification of diasporic movements starting in the second half of the 20th century, involving the displacement of peripheral populations to the big centers, has been changing the world cartography. (All along the work the translations are my own).



fluidity and fragmentation, and would have many contradictions and constant shifts.

In this sense, it also seems relevant to refer to some aspects presented by Henry Louis Gates Jr., especially when the author affirms that, in relation to the Postmodern world, "Mixing and hybridity are the rule, not the exception." (1992, p. 16). With this short, but strong statement, Gates reinforces Hall's ideas and also puts great emphasis in the fragmented aspect of the Postmodern subject.

As a consequence, it is possible to state that nowadays the world is becoming gradually more *multicultural*, with people from very different backgrounds sharing the same space and the same society (sometimes not in a friendly and harmonious way). Due to this fact, societies in general are becoming more heterogenous, which leads to the upcoming of new *hyphenated identities*. This very recent term is used to refer to the new peoples that are formed by the contact between two or more cultures. To mention some examples, I will cite African-Americans, formed by the people from African descent that helped to build US society (most of them are descendants of slaves), the Mexican-Americans, a general term used to refer to the people from Mexico that immigrated to the United States, and the Japanese-Canadians, a considerably large group of people from Japan that immigrated to Canada, forming a solid community in that country. As for these questions, it is also a good idea to consider the following excerpt:

Em tal ambiente de diáspora e conexões transculturais, discursos de autenticidade e heterogeneidade são constantemente confrontados. Em meio a eles encontramos o conceito de "hibridismo" como um controverso tópico suscitador de ampla discussão no presente. (SALGUEIRO, 2007, p. 73)<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, when it comes to the fragmentation of the Postmodern subject, it also becomes extremely necessary to refer to the theoretical ideas of Homi Bhabha, who presents this kind of subject as "in-between" in a way that they are always trying to negotiate with the cultures in which they live or survive. In relation to this, the author argues that,

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<sup>2</sup> In such an environment of diaspora and transcultural connections, discourses of authenticity and heterogeneity are constantly confronted. Within them we find the concept of hybridity as a controversial topic which provokes a great deal of discussion at present.

... we find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion. For there is a sense of disorientation, a disturbance of direction... (1994, p. 2)

This way, it is possible to state that the ideas of the authors mentioned above in a way complement each other and have some similarities with the Postmodern subject.

Still concerning Bhabha, it is also important to mention his ideas in relation to the *colonial discourse*. According to the author,

The objective of colonial discourse is to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction (1994, p. 101)

Based on this statement, it is possible to see how powerful the colonial discourse can be and how damaging may its consequences be to the colonized. As a matter of fact, the colonial discourse works as a very effective instrument of domination by the colonizer. This domination is also expressed by means of another very important concept of his theory: the one of *stereotype*.

Concerning this, Bhabha states that

Stereotyping is not the setting up of a false image which becomes the scapegoat of discriminatory practices. It is a much more ambivalent text of projection and introjection, metaphoric and metonymic strategies, displacement, over-determination, guilt, aggressivity; the masking and splitting of 'official' and fantasmal knowledges to construct the positionalities and oppositionalities of the racist discourse (1994, p. 117)

In this passage, the author very clearly associates the notion of stereotype with the discrimination by the part of the colonizer. Along with the colonial discourse, stereotype is also a way to reinforce the power of the colonizer over the colonized, especially when it comes to ideological issues. By means of stereotype, a certain image is created over the other. If the other is the colonized, this image will generally serve to place him in a position of disadvantage and this way "justify" the colonization and the power of the colonizer. As a consequence of this situation, we get to the question of *oppression*.

This oppression is actually manifested in different ways. One of them is related to the question of silencing some specific groups, which become *subaltern* people. As Gayatri Spivak states, "On the other side of the international division of labor from socialized capital, inside *and* outside the

circuit of epistemic violence (...), *can the subaltern speak? ...*" (1997, p. 25). With this question, the author makes a reflection upon the situation of the minority groups, that most of the times are tied to a social system in which they do not have voice nor rights and are always submitted to an inferior position.

This situation is also inextricably connected with the matter of *segregation*. When we think about US society, we get to a historical background full of groups that became segregated from the so-called "*white, standard society*". Especially during the 1960's, this situation gave rise to a set of very significant revolutionary movements, which I will work in Part 2.

Nowadays it is still possible to see oppression and segregation in the current US society. There are still some specific places inhabited only by Blacks, Latin-Americans and some other minority groups (the so-called *ghettos*), who live, to a certain extent, separated from the rest of the society. This way, the philosophy of "separate but equal", created in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and that is actually a reinforcement of segregation, is still at work in that society.

Thus, considering the most important ideas mentioned before, it is possible to highlight a couple of key-terms, which would be *fragmentation, in-between identities, hybridization, stereotype* and *oppression*. Undoubtedly, these terms are absolutely fundamental in the analysis of the Postmodern subject and will be the ones that will serve as the basis of my analyses in the third part.

Within this discussion, it is possible, in a certain way, to include the African-American people within the scope of the Postmodern subject, since they can be classified as diasporic as they are affected by all the consequences of fragmentation, stereotype and oppression. The situation of the Negroes in the US can be summarized in a clear way by W.E.B. Dubois, in the following quotation:

After the Egyptian and the Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, a world – which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals on one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife, - this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. (1994, p. 2)

Actually, this excerpt provides a very relevant discussion of the real identity of the American Negro. When Dubois mentions the question of “double-consciousness”, he is emphasizing the deep fragmentation that African-Americans still face within the US society. Still concerning that, one could wonder until what extent they are part of that society or, maybe, what makes them really be considered as Americans. Following this line of thought, it would be also possible to think of them as a “branch” or a specific part of US society, in other words, they would be neither *African*, nor *American*, but *African-American*.

As Dubois also states, “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line” (1994, p. 9). As a matter of fact, the problem of the color-line is not only of the twentieth century but a problem of all centuries. It is very complicated to provide an accurate definition or classification of who can be really considered Black, Negro or African-American within the US society. In fact, it is not just a question of color, but one that goes very beyond that. It is deeply rooted in the history and in the background of that people and so it is much more complex than it seems. All these factors create a problematic situation and make them face even more intensely the question of fragmentation and oppression.

As a matter of fact, my idea is not to go deep into the discussion of these aspects since this would lead to a very comprehensive discussion, which is not really my intention here. However, I believe it is important to make reference to these questions, since they permeate African-Americans’ mind and they have a strong influence upon their literature. However, before I actually start to write about African-American Literature, it is fundamental to discuss the question of the literary canon. Some considerations about this very controversial question can be seen in the excerpt:

“... should there be a black theater canon? Who would it be determined? Who would choose the works? Would it include works from all over the African diaspora? What purpose would a canon serve?” (ELAM & KRASNER, 2001)

This question of a possible black canon is actually very complex. The part of that roundtable discussion I quoted did not in fact reach a common

sense on what would be the wisest solution for this situation. As a matter of fact, this is a question that has been discussed for a considerable amount time within the black intellectual scenario, but again without any clear common opinion.

If we go deeper in this discussion, we will find that there are critics, such as Margaret Wilkerson (a member of the roundtable discussion African-American Theater: The state of Profession, Past, Present and Future, edited by J. ELAM and D. KRASNER), who totally reject this idea, pointing out that it would represent a black version of the traditional white canon so it would exclude many authors. On the other hand, other critics, like Sandra Richards (another member of that same roundtable discussion), have the opinion that this canon would be something like a necessity, and even suggest that there is indeed an implicit black canon.

Regardless of those different views, the truth is that there is not an official black canon, although some black authors are actually much more recognized than others. Also, if we consider the question of oppression and discrimination, it is easy to affirm that there is possibly a great number of black authors that remain unknown, either dead or alive. The three writers I chose to work with are actually exceptions. They managed to write and face the oppression that was put over them and bravely made their literary production be recognized. Many others, on the contrary, could not do same. They are still lost, forgotten, waiting for someone to find them somewhere.

This highlights the importance of the work of *literary archeology*, another very important concept whenever we consider African-American Literature. Actually, this term refers to the work of University Professors that dedicate themselves to “discover” those “lost” and “forgotten” writers, who, by any reason, did not have the chance to have their production shown to the world. As for this work, it is important to consider the following passage:

Dando sequência a seu trabalho de arqueologia literária, no início dos anos 90, Gates publicou uma abrangente coleção de escritos afro-americanos, produzidos no período 1829-1940, que totalizavam algo em torno de 12000 contos, 18000 poemas e 42000 resenhas e artigos. (SALGUEIRO, 2007, p. 80-81)<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Following his work of literary archeology, at the beginning of the 90's, Gates published a comprehensive collection of African-American writings, produced in the period of 1829 - 1940, which totalized about 12,000 tales, 18,000 poems and 42,000 reviews and articles.

The excerpt above reinforces the role of Henry Louis Gates Jr. within literary archeology and shows how broad the black literary production was at that time. The results of this work is little by little being put into light, as many authors, specially of the eighteenth century, are being (re)“discovered”. One very important example is Phillis Weathley, whose literary production, inserted in the context of the *slave narratives*, is gradually gaining more space within the academic scenario. In regard to this question, it is a good idea to take into consideration the following except:

The literature of the slave, published in English between 1760 and 1865, is the most obvious site to excavate the origins of the Afro-American literary tradition. Whether our definition of tradition is based on the rather narrow lines of race or nationality of authors, upon shared themes and narrated stances, or upon repeated and revised tropes, it is to the literature of the black slave that the critique must turn to identify the beginning of the Afro-American literary tradition. (GATES: 1989, 127)

This passage puts great emphasis on the importance which the *slave narratives* have within the context of African-American Literature. It is important to call back to mind that if nowadays the Black people and Black literature suffers from discrimination, during slavery this situation was much harder. As Dubois puts it,

“... few men ever worshipped Freedom with half such unquestioning faith as did the American Negro for two centuries. To him, as far as he thought and dreamed, slavery was indeed the sum of all villainies, the cause of all sorrow, the root of all prejudice.” (1994, p. 3-4)

Besides that, very few slaves had access to literacy and, consequently, very few of them were able to produce any piece of writing. Along with this, there was neither interest nor effort to make a register of those very few writings that were produced during that period. This situation led for a long time to a great “mystery” concerning what (and if any) kind of text was actually produced by the slaves. As Dubois states, “The slave wrote not primarily to demonstrate humane letters, but to demonstrate his or her own membership in the human community” (1994, p. 128). That is why many researchers are now turning their eyes into that literary production, trying to rediscover and to make a record of authors and writings from slavery times. For sure, this work of *literary archeology* will be of great value in order to understand more about the present situation of African-American culture as well as its literature.

Nowadays, African-American Literature has reached a different status. After a long period in which it was virtually inexistent (or at least it was completely shaded), now it has gained a considerable space within the US society. Many African-American writers have gotten fame, public recognition (not only in the United States, but also in other countries) and prestige, and some of them even got some very important prizes. Probably the most relevant of them was Toni Morrison's Nobel Prize in 1993. However, it is not possible to state that African-American Literature has reached the same degree of popularity as non-Black Literature, but it is visible that a great change has been taking place. This actual scenario is in fact the result of a lot of hard work and a slow, but very important modification in the mind of the US society in general, showing more acceptance and receptivity towards African-American works.

Nevertheless, African-American Literature is still the ground for plenty of controversy. Many critics face a great deal of disagreement and there are still some topics that remain unclear and need more discussion. One of them is represented by the following passage, which is actually a paraphrase which Gates Jr. made from Richard Wright's essay "How 'Bigger' Was Born", on his relevant character in the novel *Native Son*, and which was published in *The Saturday Review of Literature* on June 1<sup>st</sup>, 1940:

While these 'artistic ambassadors' somehow managed to achieve 'often technically brilliant performances', a valid black literary tradition was not allowed to thrive in this country because 'White America never offered these Negro writers any serious criticism. The mere fact that a Negro could write was astonishing'. The only form of growth that obtained in this still born tradition was provided by 'the fruits of that foul soil which was the result of a liaison between inferiority-complexed Negro 'geniuses' and burn-out white Bohemians with money. (1989, p. 115)

This excerpt calls the attention to a basic question to many people concerning African-American Literature: "Can a Negro really write?" Of course this question is deeply rooted in discrimination and oppression. Since black people were also seen as inferior than white people and unable to perform more elaborate and intellectual activities, it was a hard for a white to accept and understand that a Negro was actually able to write something considered "valuable"<sup>4</sup>. Consequently, according to this point of view, the constitution of a

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<sup>4</sup> That is one of the reasons why there was no effort in the past to look for writings produced by slaves. After all, they were not even seen as people by many whites from that period.

black literary tradition would be totally impossible. Also thinking this same way, there was no need for criticism on black texts, which made even more difficult the creation of a Black Literature in the United States. Fortunately, nowadays this situation is different, as I said before.

Another fundamental aspect concerning African-American Literature - and that deserves plenty of discussion - is to what extent it is really able to represent African-Americans as a people or as a community. The following excerpt provides a piece of reflection concerning this issue:

What seems to be clear upon reading the texts created by black writers in English or the critical texts that responded to these black writers is that the production of literature was taken to be the central arena in which persons of African descent could, or could not, establish or redefine, their status within the human community. (GATES, 1989, p. 129)

In this excerpt, Gates states very clearly this central question concerning African-American Literature. Personally, I highly agree with Gates in relation to the ideas that he presents in this quotation. I do believe black texts are able to represent them within the human community. Further than that, I believe that those texts can really represent them within the *African-American* community. I see African-American Literature as one of the most powerful tools to represent black people, together with their main problems and concerns.

Along with that, another central question comes up: the matter of blackness. As a matter of fact, this is the kind of issue that must be discussed with lots of care, since it involves many different aspects. It is a good idea to include the following passage within the context of this discussion:

The blackness of black literature is not an absolute of a metaphysical condition, as Ellison rightly maintains, nor is it some transcending essence that exists outside of its manifestations in texts. Rather, the 'blackness' of black American literature can be discerned only through close readings. By 'blackness' here I mean specific uses of literary language that are shared, repeated, critiqued, and revised. (GATES, 1989, p. 121)

Firstly, it is very important to reflect upon the term "blackness", making it very clear that it is not restricted to a mere question of color. The simple fact of having a dark complexion is definitely not enough to classify a person as black. When one talks about "blackness", it is related to a series of factors and aspects that go very beyond the question of skin color.

Very roughly speaking, being black actually means belonging to a group of people that share similar backgrounds, very hurt feelings, past sorrows,



problems and, more important than that, a definite part within society. So, the question of blackness involves not only racial, but also social, political, historical and ideological elements.

Bringing this discussion to literature, it is thus not correct to state that a black author is one who has dark skin and a black text is one produced by an author with a black skin. The actual black author would be the one who is able to get the most striking feelings and matters of his/her blackness and transmit it to his/her literary production, in a way that the reader can actually *feel* this blackness. In the quotation by Gates above, he mentions some uses of literary language to represent blackness, but actually, it is not simply a question of language use, although it definitely involves that.

Still concerning language, the following excerpt presents a relevant consideration: "It should be clear, even from a cursory familiarity with the texts of the Afro-American tradition, that black writers read and critique the texts of other black writers as an act of rhetorical self-definition" (GATES, 1989, p. 122). This passage, also taken from Gates, makes a relation between the question of language and the question of identity. It points out the characteristic of African-American Literature that a great number of its authors tend to look back on texts from writers of the past so as to look for a kind of inspiration or maybe a revision of their own identities.

In addition to that, I would not be able to conclude the present section without still referring to two other important African-American Professors who have been working on the topic largely in the last years: Charles W. Mills and F. James Davis.

Charles W. Mills is Professor of Philosophy. After an award winning and extremely successful book for the study of intolerance and human rights in North America (*The Racial Contract*, 1997), one year later Professor Mills published a series of intriguing essays in *Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race*. The departing point of the essays is Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Tackling a broad scope of issues such as black-Jewish relations, gender (women X blacks), white supremacy, racism, and others, Mills deals with them as a philosopher would be expected to, incorporating epistemological, metaphysical, ethical, political, sociological, and literary considerations, both in

the text as in its final rich notes. With constant eagerness to throw light on supposed ambiguities, Mills departs from the seeming contradiction of a nation – the USA - with a philosophical base founded on individual rights that nonetheless has a history of brutal treatment of nonwhites. According to Mills, in fact, there is no contradiction: he clearly shows that racism is part of the political fabric, inherited from Empire and European colonization. Literature is present again in his text as he quotes “Whose Fourth of July?”, Frederick Douglass’s oratorical antislavery masterpiece, delivered on July 5, 1852, entitled *The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro*.

In *Who Is Black? One Nation's Definition*, F. James Davis works over another ‘myth’ involving blacks and whites. Departing from the “one-drop rule”, which refers to the idea widely spread in the US that simply “one drop” of black blood defines as black “any person with any known African ancestry”, Davis shows that both blacks and whites embrace this overly broad definition but argues that this “big Lie . . . causes traumatic personal experiences, dilemmas of personal identity, misperceptions of the racial classification of well over a billion of the earth's people, conflicts in families and in the black community, and more.” (DAVIS, 2005) Published several times since its first edition in 1991, Davis wrote an Epilogue to its tenth anniversary edition, in which he highlights some revealing responses to ‘Who Is Black?’ and examines recent challenges to the one-drop rule, including the multiracial identity movement as well as meaningful changes in the census classification of racial and ethnic groups.

## 2 – AFRICAN-AMERICANS IN THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

In this chapter I intend to provide a considerably comprehensive view of the African-American experience in the United States throughout the twentieth century under the possibilities of the present work. My theoretical departing point in this chapter will derive mostly from Carroll and Noble's *The Free and the Unfree – A New History of the United States* and Appiah and Gates' *Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African-American Experience*. I believe these two works are important as far as the African-American experience is concerned and should definitely be taken as basic sources. However, I will not work exclusively with these works and will make reference to the other works by these two authors and also by other authors.

I will divide the century into four different moments, namely: *The Beginning of the Century*, *The Harlem Renaissance*, *The Civil Rights Era* and *The End of the Century*. These names were chosen since, from everything I have read, they stand for the most important moments of the African-American experience in the twentieth century. These moments will be worked upon separately and this way will form the four divisions of this chapter. I decided for this kind of division because I thought it would help me to convey the information in a more clear and organized way. I did not decide to divide the century into decades since I do not believe that working with specific decades and chronology would fulfill my objectives within this chapter. It is also necessary to emphasize that my focus will not be the *US* background in the twentieth century, but the *African-American* background in the twentieth century. This way, I will not make reference to all the events which took place in the century in that country, but just to the ones that really had a relevant influence on African-Americans.

It is important to make it clear that I do not intend to present all that information in just a didactic or elucidatory way. Actually, my objective within this chapter is working with such content in a rather critical manner, raising relevant questions to be reflected upon.

Finally, it is also necessary to emphasize that this chapter will serve as a background to the following one, since it will provide a view of the different moments and contexts lived by the African-American population that definitely had a deep influence on the production of the works under study in this dissertation.

## **2.1 – The Beginning of the Century**

The beginning of the twentieth century was rather difficult for the African-American people in the United States. From the early 1900's until the first years of the 1920's, the black people in the US still suffered from the effects of the Puritan Age. At the end of the nineteenth century, there was a movement which had a great influence upon the US society mind: the Purity Crusade. In very brief words, it was a religious movement conducted by Protestant churches with the objective of fighting against a so-called loosening of morality and establishing a so-called sexual morality and social control. Within this context, certain groups, such as African-Americans, the non-Protestant people and the Native Americans, had to face a great deal of discrimination, since they were seen as impure or even not as sons of God. The influence of the Protestant religion on the United States was high at that time, so these ideals were accepted by most of the people. The following passage provides a relevant example of how such ideals were carried out:

‘The stage is set, the destiny is disclosed. It has come about by no plan of our conceiving, but by the hand of God who led us into the war. We cannot turn back. America shall still in truth show the way.’ With these words, Woodrow Wilson had exhorted his fellow Americans to bring the Purity Crusade to a climax and finally to purge evil and darkness from the entire world. (CARROLL & NOBLE, 1984, p. 319)

As it is possible to see in this excerpt, at that period the US society resembled very much to the one that had existed in the previous centuries, when people were discriminated, segregated, demonized and sometimes even killed due to religious values and in the name of a so-called mission of the US people to bring spiritual light into the world and save it from “evil and darkness”.

This way, when the twentieth century began, the US society in general was still characterized by a mentality influenced, at a great extent, by Puritan values and beliefs which had existed all over the nineteenth century, especially the ones that inspired the Purity Crusade. As a matter of fact, that period may be even considered as a moment of transition and so the mind of the US society was being modified very slowly. This situation generated a great number of conflicts involving the African-American people and so they had to face a lot of problems, prejudice and discrimination. For instance, the typical African-American music styles, such as soul music, rag and especially jazz, were almost prohibited in that society since they were considered very sexual, sensual, and, consequently, threatening. Actually, this prohibition was just another element which served to reinforce the negative view upon black people within that society.

Little by little, though, the reality of the US society began to be modified. In the beginning of the 1920's, Puritan values started to lose their power and, as a result, people's minds started to become more liberal and permissive. This new mentality generated important effects in the US society, as shown in the following excerpt:

The Purity Crusade had been fighting against a loosening of morality not only at the lowest socio-economic class, but also among the middle class. The divorce rate of the middle class had increased steadily from 1890 to 1920; it would double in the 1920's. Other symptoms of decline alarmed conservatives. The urban middle class had stopped chaperoning its daughters after 1900, and there was a tremendous decline in the pattern of premarital virginity by 1920. It was clear that by 1910 a new code of permissiveness was being elaborated by the young. Soon unchaperoned, sexual intimacy became acceptable within the context of an affectionate relationship that might result in marriage. (CARROLL & NOBLE, 1984, p. 320)

The establishment of this new sexual code was one of the first steps that made the construction of a society characterized by less prejudice and discrimination possible. It is clear that this only change was not enough and it did not stop with all the discrimination in that society, but it was certainly one of the most important events that contributed to the process of change which the US society was experiencing at that moment.

Going back to the passage above about President Wilson's words, it is important to pay attention to the reference to the war. Actually, this reference can be understood in two different ways. It can be interpreted as a metaphor

standing for the war against “evil and darkness” in the world, this way having just a religious connotation, or it can be a reference to World War I, which took place during Wilson’s presidency in the United States. As a matter of fact, the War was probably the event which marked US society more deeply during that period.

As a matter of fact, the participation of the United States in the World War I was polemical and controversial. A considerable part of the US society did not agree that the country had to join the War and contribute for it. This way, the decision of the US Government to take part in that conflict generated dissatisfaction in some parts of the US population. On the other hand, when the War finally ended, the United States managed to achieve a very favorable economic position in the world. The most important countries in Europe at that time, such as Germany, France and England, were almost completely destroyed by the War and had to reconstruct themselves. However, the United States were living the exact opposite situation, since the War did not leave any destruction there and also provided the country with great opportunity to grow economically by “helping” the European countries in their reconstruction. The consequence of this situation is that the US economy increased a lot and soon became the first in the world, leaving the United States as the richest country of all. Also at that time, US industry experienced a moment of intense growth and the population, especially the middle class, became much more consumerist. Therefore, the United States were living an Age of Prosperity.

In spite of that, along with the disillusionment concerning the War, US society also had the same feeling towards all the time more apparent consequences of the Industrial Revolution, since, although it actually generated a great deal of progress, there were also a few important shortcomings, such as child labor, overconcentration of population in big cities, pollution, overwork and lack of labor rights. These negative social effects caused dissatisfaction to many people and created an unpleasant environment in many places.

This feeling of disillusionment concerning both the World War I and the Industrial Revolution was one of the reasons to give rise to a new literary movement in the United States: the Lost Generation. It is a term used to describe a group of US writers who were rebelling against what the United

States had become in the first years of the 1900's. The most important writers who took part in that movement were Ernest Hemingway, Francis Scott Fitzgerald, Ezra Pound, Sherwood Anderson, Waldo Peirce, John Dos Passos, John Steinbeck, and Cole Porter. In relation to them, it is important to consider that:

For the poets and novelists of the 1920's, the "lost generation", born between 1890 and 1900 and reared within the prophecy of the industrial frontier, World War I was even more shattering than it was for their teachers. Bitterly disillusioned, academics like Beard, Dewey, and Veblen abandoned internationalism for isolation. They abandoned hope that the entire world could be brought into industrial rationality, but they continued to hope that this could be the future of the United States. (CARROLL & NOBLE, 1984, p. 320)

Along with that, these writers felt that the United States were not the ideal place to live because the country lacked a cosmopolitan culture. So, they decided to travel to Europe's cosmopolitan cultures, such as the ones in Paris and London, where they expected to find literary freedom and a cosmopolitan way of life. As a consequence, US Literature went through a moment of profound change just after the World War I. Until this point, US writers were still expected to make use of more traditional writing styles. This way, the Lost Generation writers were the element that brought more modern elements to US Literature.

This group of writers was responsible for the production of several masterpieces of US Literature, such as Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), and Dos Passos' *The Three Soldiers* (1921), which are still nowadays considered of great value so as to understand what that movement represented.

As a consequence of this background characterized by the feeling of disillusionment and dissatisfaction, together with the more liberal and permissive mentality that was being constructed in US society, and also under the influence of the Lost Generation, different kinds of artistic manifestations, especially the ones which were not produced by the mainstream and canonical groups, had the chance to gain space in the US cultural scenario. As a matter of fact, such artistic manifestations already existed before that moment, but they had never had the chance to achieve public recognition. Within this context, African-American Art had its first opportunity to become visible in the United States: that was the time of the Harlem Renaissance.

## 2.2 – The Harlem Renaissance

In very brief words, The Harlem Renaissance was a period between 1920 and 1930 in The United States in which there was a striking ascension of the African-American artistic production. It is very important to emphasize that this movement involved not only literature, but also art as a whole. As Carroll and Noble put it, “Young poets, novelists, playwrights, composers flowered in an environment of black pride ...” (1984, p. 326). This movement was not essentially a revolutionary one, but indeed it served to affirm black pride by affirming the value of black art. This emphasis on racial pride came to be represented in the idea of the New Negro, who through intellect and production of literature, art, and music could challenge the pervading racism and the stereotypes created by the society in order to promote progressive or socialist politics, and racial and social integration. This way, the creation of literature and art as a whole would serve to valorize race.

Within this context, it is important to make reference to the anthology *The New Negro* edited by Alain Locke in 1925, whose introductory essay The New Negro, written by Locke provides a quite trustworthy depiction of ideals of The Harlem Renaissance. In this essay, the author writes that the African-American people are no longer sorry for their blackness but, contrary to that, they take a new pride concerning their racial identity and heritage (LOCKE, 1992, p. 4)

At that time, many black artists achieved recognition and fame in The United States. In music, for instance, that was the time when music styles such as *soul music*, *rag* and *jazz* came to the spotlight and some musicians and singers, such as Louis Armstrong, had the opportunity to show their work to the country. Also, at that time the city of New Orleans became famous and considered the homeland of jazz. The following passage provides a valuable summary of the main characteristics of The Harlem Renaissance:

Desta forma, no início do século XX, somando-se às conquistas individuais em muitos campos, o talento dos negros floresceu nas artes e na música durante as décadas de 20, 30 e 40. Este levante artístico, nos Estados Unidos, começou no Harlem, bairro negro de Nova York e ficou conhecido como Harlem Renaissance. Apesar de seu início localizado nessa cidade estadunidense, sua influência espalhou-se mundo afora. Cabe lembrar que em 1920, a população negra, concentrada principalmente no Harlem, contava mais de 150 mil pessoas e constituía a maior comunidade negra do país. Ao



longo desse período, uma fantástica constelação de talentos literários, teatrais, musicais e artísticos iria lhe trazer um renome em escala mundial. Apenas como um exemplo, tais talentos iriam produzir uma nova música que iria se espalhar pelo país e pelo mundo inteiro – tornar-se imediatamente a música mais tipicamente americana: havia nascido a época do jazz, obra coletiva por excelência, ritual de uma comunidade. Na música, gerou, entre outros, Count Basie, Duke Ellington e Louis Armstrong. De tal movimento saíram ainda nomes marcantes e alguns extremamente influentes sobre outros artistas negros que ainda surgiriam. Entre os do campo da Literatura, podemos citar romancistas como Nella Larsen e Zora Neale Hurston e o poeta Langston Hughes. (SALGUEIRO, 2005, p. 83-84)<sup>5</sup>

Specifically concerning Literature, that was the first moment in the history of US Literature that a group of African-American writers started to appear more visibly in the context of that Literature and their works were recognized (even by white people). As Maufort states,

Based upon a more critical degree of self-awareness and more systematic exploration of the varied identities and social levels of blacks in both urban and rural settings, the literary expression of this new image, embodied in the concept of 'soul' (...) gathered force in all genres as many young black writers joined the chorus of voices inspired by the Harlem renaissance. (1996, p. 505)

This new group of black authors includes names which deeply marked the history of the African-American people in the US, such as Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, Ralph Ellison, Zora Neale Hurston, James Weldon, Arna Bontemps and, of course, Jean Toomer.

In order to understand a little more about how this movement came to existence, it is important to make some considerations concerning the origin of its name. First, "Harlem" is a reference to a district of New York City. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the African-American community had begun to establish a middle class, especially in the big cities. Harlem, a neighborhood of New York City, became a center for this growing African-American middle class. Throughout the years, the place experienced more development and soon became the most famous place associated with the black community in

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<sup>5</sup> This way, at the beginning of the 20th century, in addition to individual achievements in many fields, the African-American talent flourished in arts and in music during the decades of 20, 30 and 40. This artistic movement, in the United States, started in Harlem, a black neighborhood in New York, and became known as The Harlem Renaissance. Although it started in that city, its influence soon spread all over the world. Throughout this period, a fantastic constellation of literary, theatrical, musical and artistic talents would make it famous worldwide. Just as an example, such talents would produce a new music which would spread across the country and across the whole world – becoming the most typical US music: The Jazz Age had been born, a genuine collective production, the ritual of a community. Within music, it generated, among others, Count Basie, Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong. Out of this movement also came some striking artists who had an influence upon other black artists that would still come up. Among the literary artists, it is possible to cite names such as novelists Nella Larsen and Zora Neale Hurston, and the poet Langston Hughes.

the United States. In the 1920's, it was already very recognized as the center of the events associated with the African-American community and actually that was the place where many artists from the Harlem Renaissance lived. "Renaissance" is a clear reference to the artistic movement which happened in Europe just after the Middle Ages, characterized by the restoration of Greco-Roman art. In this case, it was the black art that was being restored. The Harlem Renaissance is also called Negro Awakening by several authors.

Although Harlem was the place most commonly associated with the black community, there were other places in the United States in which there was a massive presence of the African-American population. In the first decades of the twentieth century, there were big migrations of the black people from the south to other regions of the country. This way, there was a considerable number of black people in places such as California and Ohio. This expansion of African-American communities created a greater market for black culture, especially for jazz and blues. There was also a better integration among these communities and it was very common that black artists from the South, for instance, would go to the North in order to perform in nightclubs – Harlem's and others.

At the same time, the interest towards African-American artistic production was gradually growing and even white people were becoming increasingly fascinated by it. A considerable number of white artists and patrons began to offer black artists access to "mainstream" publishers and art venues. However, in spite of the increasing popularity of black culture, racism continued to have a hard impact in African-American communities and social problems and conflicts persisted. Anyway, that was indeed a very important step for the affirming of African-American artistic production.

Another fundamental aspect of the Harlem Renaissance that is relevant to mention is its division in three stages. Although this movement did not last for quite a long time, there were some different moments which should be identified, as it is possible to see in the following passage:

The Harlem Renaissance evolved through three stages. The first phase, ending in 1923 with the publication of Jean Toomer's unique prose poem, *Cane*, was deeply influenced by white artists and writers – bohemians and revolutionaries – fascinated for a variety of reasons with the life of black people. The second phase, from early 1924 to mid-1926, was presided over by the civil rights establishment of the NUL and the NAACP (...). The last

phase (...) until 1934, was increasingly dominated by the African-American artists themselves. (APPIAH & GATES, 1999, p. 926)

As a matter of fact, there is not an agreement among scholars concerning the exact year or the exact moment when Harlem Renaissance started, but it is common sense that its first stage started in the late 1910's or in the early 1920's. In 1917 there was the first exhibition of *Three Plays for a Negro Theatre*. These plays, written by white playwright Ridgely Torrence, featured black actors conveying complex human emotions and feelings. Within the play, they rejected the stereotypes created upon black people. In that same year, James Weldon Johnson referred to these plays as "the most important single event in the entire history of the Negro in the American Theatre." (WELDON, In: GATES Jr. & MCKAY, 1999, p.931) Another important event happened in 1919, when Claude McKay published his striking poem If We Must Die. Although it does not refer directly to race, it is implicit that it was written as a kind of defiance in relation to racism and discrimination taking place at that time.

In relation to the white influence mentioned in the passage, it is important to state that The Harlem Renaissance also depended on the patronage of white Americans, such as Carl Van Vechten and Charlotte Osgood Mason, who provided many forms of assistance, opening doors and providing opportunities for the publication of works outside the black community. As a consequence, The Harlem Renaissance led to more opportunities for African-American writings to be published by mainstream houses. Many authors began to publish novels, magazines and newspapers during that time. The new fiction attracted a great amount of attention from the nation and many writers of The Harlem Renaissance ended up by becoming nationally famous.

In regard to the second and the third stages, it is possible to say that The Harlem Renaissance became more centered in the figures of the artists since they had already achieved a considerable recognition and because of that they did not depend so much on white patronage. There was indeed an influence of politics in the second stage due to the US context at that time and this certainly had an influence upon the writings produced at that time. Anyway, the most important characteristic of these two stages is the more prominent position that

these artists achieved and the increasing recognition of their production within society as a whole.

In addition to that, it is necessary to reinforce the role of music in the context of the Harlem Renaissance, more specifically when it comes to jazz. This music style achieved a great success especially during the 1920s, and became very popular among the citizens of Harlem. In a short time, it gained national and even worldwide recognition. As a consequence, some nightclubs in Harlem became very popular at that time, such as the Savoy Ballroom, the Apollo Theatre, and The Cotton Club. At these places there were presentations of the most famous artists of that time and they became symbols of the African-American jazz music. However, the popularity of jazz music soon spread throughout the country and in a short time jazz performers made presentations in many different parts of the United States. Innovation and liveliness were important characteristics of such performers. Jazz musicians at the time, such as Duke Ellington, Jelly Roll Morton, and Louis Armstrong were very talented and competitive.

When it comes to the Plastic Arts, there are also important names that need to be mentioned. Some artists, mainly Jacob Lawrence and Romare Bearden, had a considerable influence of the African-American style within their artistic production. The following passage provides more details about that:

Para não deixarmos de fazer breve menção às Artes Plásticas afro-americanas do início do século XX, é impossível não citar o impacto que tais idéias sobre os trabalhos de artistas tais como Jacob Lawrence e Romare Bearden. Jacob Armstead Lawrence (1917 - 2000), um dos mais proeminentes artistas afro-americanos, pintou quadros figurativos e narrativos sobre a comunidade e a história negras por mais de setenta anos em um estilo modernista consistente (...) Romare Bearden (1912-1988) cresceu no Harlem em meio a constantes contatos em casa com personalidades afro-americanas como Langston Hughes, Fats Waller e Duke Ellington. Verdadeiro filho do "Harlem Renaissance", sua vida e obra foram uma constante expressão deste veio criativo dos Estados Unidos. (SALGUEIRO, 2005, p. 87-88)<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> In order to mention briefly the African-American Plastic Arts from the beginning of the 20th century, it is impossible not to cite the impact that such ideas had upon the works of artists such as Jacob Lawrence and Romare Bearden. Jacob Lawrence (1917 -), one of the most prominent African-American artists, painted figurative paintings about the black community and history for more than seventy years in a consistent modern style. (...) Romare Bearden (1912-1988) grew up in Harlem in the middle of constant contacts at home with African-American personalities such as Langston Hughes, Fats Waller and Duke Ellington. A genuine son of The Harlem Renaissance, his life and his works were a constant expression of this creative style in the United States.

Also during this time period, the musical style and culture of black people was becoming gradually more attractive to whites. White novelists, dramatists and composers started to exploit the musical tendencies and themes of African-American in their works. In addition to that, the connection between literature and music was a recurrent characteristic of many African-American texts, as it is possible to see in *Cane* as well (I will show this in greater detail when I write more specifically about this literary text).

Some common themes represented during the Harlem Renaissance were the influence of the experience of slavery, the question of black identity, the effects of racism upon society, the matters concerning performing and writing for white audiences, and the question of how to convey the experience of modern black life in the urban North.

One more reason for the success of The Harlem Renaissance is that it appealed to a mixed audience. Its literature appealed to the African-American middle class and to whites. Some magazines of the time, such as *The Crisis* and *Opportunity* employed Harlem Renaissance writers on their editorial staffs, published poetry and short stories by black writers, and promoted African-American literature through articles, reviews, and literary prizes. African-American musicians and other performers also played to mixed audiences. Harlem's clubs attracted both black and white people looking for the African-American rhythms. For instance, Cotton Club provided black entertainment exclusively for white audiences.

However, this atmosphere of great optimism and the very considerable ascension of the African-American culture was harshly affected by the Crash of the Stock Market, in the year of 1929, giving rise to the Great Depression, which was an extremely difficult and complex moment in US history. As for this big crisis, it is important to consider the following quotation:

... in October 1929 the stock market crashed. Unemployment was two million in 1928, three million in 1929, four million in 1930, seven million in 1931, twelve million in 1932, and fifteen million in 1933. Industrial production dropped by 50 percent, and national income fell from \$82 billion to \$40 billion during these four terrible years. (CAROLL & NOBLE, 1984, p. 335)

Such a harsh situation had deep effects in US society as a whole. If before the crisis the United States were living a moment of increasing prosperity, the Great Depression came as a kind of pause to all the progress

which had been achieved until that moment. Before that disgraceful situation, US people were experiencing a stage in which it was possible to consume many different products and they had a reality much more favorable than any other country in the world. However, after the crisis, they started living situations such as the one described in the excerpt below:

As people literally starved, they resorted to city garbage. Scenes like this one reported on a Chicago newspaper became common-place: 'Around the truck which was unloading garbage and other refuse, were about thirty-five men, women, and children. As soon as the truck pulled away from the pile, all of them started digging with sticks, some with their hands, grabbing bites of food and vegetables.'(CAROLL & NOBLE, 1984, p. 337)

Later on, Presidents Herbert Hoover and Franklin Roosevelt managed to recover US economy, but that was definitely a time of great recession in all ways. Evidently, that situation also had an effect concerning cultural development and, of course, it affected directly the Harlem Renaissance. Since it was difficult even to get food, as it is possible to see in the passage above, the investments in art were virtually cut off and so it became hardly impossible to continue any cultural movement. As a consequence, The Harlem Renaissance unfortunately came to an end.

Anyway, I believe the most positive point of The Harlem Renaissance is that, for the first time in US history, some aspects of the African-American experience were brought within the context of US culture as a whole. Actually, not only at a cultural level, but also at a sociological one, the legacy of The Harlem Renaissance is that it redefined the way in which the United States and the world viewed the African-American population. This new conscience helped to shape a spirit of revolution that would be necessary for the struggles of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950's and 1960's.

### **2.3 – The Civil Rights Era**

The Sixties were one of the most important periods in US history. Important events happened and revolutionary movements took place during that

time. In relation to this situation, it is a good idea to consider the following passage is worth considering:

For those pundits who considered the social and political climate of the 1950's dull, the following decade would provide a striking contrast. The 1960's were years of extraordinary *turbulence* and *innovation* in public affairs – as well as sudden tragedy and trauma. (TINDALL & SHI, 1989, p. 863, my emphasis)

I believe this is an appropriate quotation that may be employed to describe the sixties. My emphasis in the terms “turbulence” and “innovation” is due to the fact that in such a decade, the United States experienced a series of extremely remarkable social movements and reforms which continue to be important up to nowadays.

Before going through such movements, it is necessary to provide an overview of the social and political situation of the United States at that time. At the very beginning of the 1940's, some years after the Crash of the Stock Market and its very negative effects, as well as the end of the Harlem Renaissance, the United States entered the World War II, which was a tense moment in the US history. Just after the War finished, the United States experienced a sort of paradoxical moment. On one hand, there was a considerable economic development, since there was an increasingly process of industrialization and that brought more wealth to the country. Along with that, there was also a great focus on advertisement and consumerism, as well as the construction of the first shopping malls and the expansion of suburbs in big cities, exactly with the objective of enhancing the US economy. On the other hand, the social development was not keeping up with the economic development and such a situation generated a society characterized by an intense social inequality. Of course, this would create a feeling of dissatisfaction in the groups who were marginalized and did not have access to the wealth that was being created. At that time, there were still millions of people in the United States living under poverty and there was still a great deal of prejudice and discrimination towards certain social groups.

Besides this delicate internal situation, the country was also facing a difficult time concerning its foreign policy, since it was involved with several international conflicts. The most important of them were the Cuban Missile Crisis, the political and ideological conflicts with the Soviet Union and the

question of Vietnam War. The participation of the US in such conflicts, especially in the last one, generated a feeling of disagreement and discomfort in a great part of US society.

Considering this social and political situation, those movements were carried out by some minority groups that had been suffering the *oppression* of society since the beginnings of the nation as a way to protest and fight against such *oppression*. Mainly, those groups were African-Americans, women, the youth, Indians (also referred to as Native Americans) and immigrants. They were actually fighting for their rights and against *oppression*, within the movement that came to be known as the *Civil Rights Movement*. This was in fact a worldwide movement, but especially in the United States it produced a considerable number of extremely important names that still have an influence in our contemporary revolutionary movements.

The Youth Movement was a very strong way. Probably the most important event which gave rise to it was the institution of the New Left, which began in the University of California and soon spread to several universities all over the country. At first, it was more of a philosophical movement, inspired, for example, in Rosseau's ideas. The main objective of that movement was to show all the dissatisfaction of the young people towards several aspects of society at that time, including the Vietnam War. Little by little, though, the movement started to gain a more revolutionary aspect and ended up becoming a rather violent one, eventually leading to its end. Anyway, it managed to promote several social manifestations (especially in the year of 1968), which suffered strong repression from the authorities, who reacted, in many occasions, in a violent way.

Still concerning the Youth Movement, it is necessary to mention the importance of the Hippies. Although the Hippy Movement was not essentially revolutionary and politically engaged, it represented a striking kind of protest against the social context of the American society at that time and still has a great influence until nowadays.

Within Literature, this new mind of the young people gave origin to a literary movement called "The Beat Generation" or "The Beats". This term is used to describe a group of US writers, mostly from New York and San



Francisco, who started to appear more visibly in the decades of 1950 and 1960. The most important elements of the Beat culture included a rejection of mainstream US values, experimentation of drugs and alternative forms of sexuality, and an interest in Eastern spirituality. During the 1960s, the rapidly expansion of the Beat culture passed through some important transformations, giving origin to the Sixties Counterculture, which is also associated with the Hippies. Among the most famous writers of the Beat Generation were Allen Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs, Jack Kerouac and Neal Cassady. In addition to them, it is fundamental to mention that Amiri Baraka was also involved with this movement.

In regard of the Feminist Movement, it was based mainly on Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). The movement managed to achieve several social improvements for women, who also suffered lots of prejudice and segregation in that society. It also managed to create some important institutions, such as the NOW (National Organization of Women) and the ERA (Equal Rights Associations), which became very important instruments as far as women's rights were concerned. The Feminist Movement had also a great influence all over the world, since it inspired other feminist movements in many different countries and served to show women all over the world that it was worth fighting for their rights.

Other marginalized and minority groups also gained some more power in the Sixties. Immigrants and rural people manage to achieve some social improvements and the Indians (also called as Native Americans) founded the AIM (American Indian Movement), an association in charge of defending their rights.

Specifically concerning the black people, the African-American Civil Rights Movement was notably a very strong one. It is characterized by a large number of civil manifestations which involved thousands of people in many different cities of the United States. The most striking feature of such manifestations was certainly the fact that they were actually non-violent and pacific acts of civil disobedience. Another very important aspect of this movement was the influence of institutions and organizations, such as the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), the

CORE (Congress of Racial Equality), the SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) and the SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Conference), which played fundamental roles within the context of the African-American Civil Rights. Such organizations were of great importance, as it is possible to see in

During the early 1960's different groups and leaders experimented with a variety of tactics and strategies. SNCC and CORE organizers carved out a critical base as they fanned out across the South and established community-based projects to help support and sustain local organizing efforts around voting and mass protests against segregation. (APPIAH & GATES, 1999, p. 450)

This passage is relevant because it puts emphasis on the role that these institutions played within US society and the Civil Rights Movement, providing support for local organizations and encouraging the fight for the African-American rights.

Still concerning this movement, it is fundamental to make reference to its most relevant figures, namely: Martin Luther King Jr., Malcom X., Rosa Parks, and W.E.B. Dubois. These people were key names in US history and certainly left a very profound mark not only in US society but also in the world as a whole.

Specifically concerning Martin Luther King Jr., it is possible to affirm that the Black Movement gained power mostly over his figure and his ideas of non-violence. Based mostly on Mahatma Gandhi's ideals of bloodless revolution constructed through pacifism, King managed to conduct thousands of people to many events in different places in the country with no sign of violence. Instead of encouraging people to get weapons and attack violently their opponents, he led the people to march in quite pacific protests. With a notable religious influence, (besides being a political leader, Martin Luther King Jr. was also a Baptist minister) his speeches became extremely remarkable to the movement at that time and still have a deep influence nowadays. I should make a special reference to "I Have a Dream", his most famous speech. As Tindall & Shi affirm, "Yet King's dream – shared and promoted by thousands of activists – survived" (1989, p. 869). We may even say that it not only survived, but is actually extremely alive.

Luther King's association with President John Kennedy was fundamental for the implementation of the Civil Rights in the United States and to several events which led to their consolidation. It also proved to be a very powerful political instrument within that social context and was of great value for the creation of the Civil Rights Act in 1964. As for this event, it is important to consider that

In the mid-1950's in Mississippi, NAACP chapters and the Regional Council of Negro leaderships began a concerted effort to increase black voter registration. In 1954, just 4 percent of the state's eligible black voting-age population were registered. (APPIAH & GATES, 1999, p. 448)

This passage makes reference to another very important event that occurred at that time, more precisely, in 1965: the Voting Rights Act. In that society, very few black people had access to voting. With this new Act, the number of African-American voters soon increased and this helped a lot within the context of the fight for their rights.

Even with the assassination of both, John Kennedy in the year of 1963, and Martin Luther King Jr. in the year of 1968, their fight has never been forgotten and their ideals continue to inspire many social movements all over the world even nowadays.

In addition to Luther King, it is important to remember the attitude of Rosa Parks. At that time, due to the intense segregation which existed in US society, the black people were allowed to sit only at specific seats at the back of the buses. However, if there were a white passenger standing on the bus, the black people were forced to stand so that such white passenger could sit. On December 1<sup>st</sup>, 1955, Parks refused to leave her bus seat for a white man and was arrested because of that. At first sight, this attitude may seem rather simple, but at the time it carried a very remarkable meaning, since it was actually an act of reaction against the *oppression* suffered by the blacks in that society. After that event, Rosa Parks played a more active role within the black movement and accompanied Martin Luther King Jr. to many events.

Besides Luther King and Rosa Parks, Malcom X also had a fundamental participation within the African-American Civil Rights Movement. In spite of being also a fundamental African-American leader, Malcom X's philosophy was not like King's and he actually created a radical and even violent movement.

The “X” in his name is actually a metaphor which stands for his lost and unknown origins in Africa.

He was raised in a Baptist family, had a troubled childhood, and spent some years in prison. At that time, he decided to become a Muslim and adopted the name Malcom X (before that, he was known as Malcom Little). During his adult life, he had contact with different political leaders all over the world, especially in Africa and conducted many movements within the United States, most of the times involving students. He also made many speeches and was quite recognized by them. Just as Luther King, he was assassinated in the year of 1964.

Last but not least, I should refer to W.E.B. Dubois. He was an activist, sociologist, historian, author, and editor. Despite being very politically engaged, he became more famous by his intellectual work. During his academic life, he produced a great number of books, articles and different kinds of material featuring on themes of Africa and their legacy to African-Americans, as well as the question of blackness. He was the first African-American to earn a Ph. D. from Harvard University. The material that he produced has still a great influence as far as African-American Studies are concerned and he is definitely one of the most respected authors within this area.

Furthermore, it is important to refer to some most noteworthy events. It is necessary to highlight *The March on Washington*, in which approximately 250,000 people (mostly African-Americans) marched on Washington D.C., asking for more equal living conditions, more jobs and freedom. It was at that march that Martin Luther King delivered his speech “I Have a Dream”. Other striking events were *The Busing Dilemma* (1954) in which nearly two hundred black students in five school buses, going from Louisville to Boston as a protest against the segregation in the schools, were cowardly attacked by many white riots throughout their way, and *The Montgomery Bus Boycott* (1955 – 1956), when black people got together and organized a movement to boycott the bus company in Montgomery so that they could get better conditions in public transportation in that city.

That intense climate of revolution and that atmosphere deeply marked by social changes had a great influence on the Literature produced at that time.

Some black writers managed to obtain national recognition, such as James Baldwin, with his books involving blackness and homosexuality, two characteristics considered abominable at that time. Another author that also became recognized at that time was Richard Wright, with his masterpiece *Native Son* (1940), which got three different translations into Portuguese. Ralph Ellison also got very famous with his novel *Invisible Man* (1953), which was considered a striking book at the time and has impact until nowadays. Ellison even got the National Book Award for this novel in 1953. Furthermore, Gwendolyn Brooks became famous for her poems and won the Pulitzer Prize for her poetry book *Annie Allen* (1949). Besides her, Lorraine Hansberry got recognition for her plays, especially *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), which was even adapted for a movie. Finally, Amiri Baraka also managed to achieve a great deal of fame for his writings, especially for his plays, which were in general very strong and shocking.

This way, the Civil Rights Era proved to be a fundamental period for African-Americans in the United States, since the great number of social movements and revolutionary acts that happened at that time opened way to extremely important changes in the society and still serve as inspiration for leaders and movements nowadays.

## **2.4 – The End of the Century**

The African-American people managed to have other important changes after the Civil Rights Era. Due to the intense fight and struggles which took place all over that period, a great number of positive changes came as a result of such a hard, but important moment. I would like to remark that I will make reference to some facts and events that happened in the very beginning of the twenty-first century, rightly after the end of the twentieth century, since I believe such events came up as a consequence of the ones which took place all over that century and also because I think it is important to depict the situation of African-Americans as they are living at the present moment.

In social and economic terms, there was some progress concerning African-Americans, but actually it was a rather slow one. The general economic situation of the black people in the United States nowadays is not very favorable. According to the United States Census Bureau, African-Americans have improved their social and economic situation since the Civil Rights Era and, recently, they have experienced the expansion of a black middle class across the United States. Also gradually, they have got more access to higher and academic education, as well as better employment. Nevertheless, due to the negative legacy of slavery, racism and discrimination, which still affect strongly African-Americans, they remain at economic, educational and social disadvantage in many areas in relation to whites. Still nowadays, many African-Americans have to face social and economic problems such as, inadequate health care access and delivery, institutional racism and discrimination in housing, education, criminal justice and employment, violence, poverty and different forms of abuse. For instance, according to the same aforementioned source, in 2004, 24.7% of African-American families lived below the poverty level. In 2007, the average African-American income was \$33,916, compared with \$54,920 for whites. Nevertheless, there seems to be appearing a black middle class in the United States, as the number of African-Americans living under the poverty line has been constantly reducing.

One exception of this situation is Oprah Winfrey, the TV host and producer of one of the most popular talk-shows in the US, who was included in the group of the richest people in US society, was the richest African-American of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and was the world's only black billionaire in the years of 2004, 2005, and 2006. She is also responsible for bringing to the screen forgotten African-American texts such as *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker, *The Women of Brewster Place* by Gloria Naylor, and most recently, *Push* by Sapphire and its movie adaptation "Precious".

When it comes to politics, there were important political leaders who got elected. For instance, in 1989, Douglas Wilder became the first African-American elected governor in the U.S. history. In 1992 Carol Moseley-Braun became the first African-American woman elected to the U.S. Senate. In 2000,

there were 8,936 black officeholders in the United States, an increase of 7,467 since 1970. In 2001, 484 black people were elected mayors.

Other examples of the political changes are the 38 African-American members of Congress, who form the Congressional Black Caucus, which serves as a kind of political bloc for issues relating to African-American people. Along with that, there was the appointment of African-Americans to high federal offices, for example, General Colin Powell, Chairman of the U.S. Armed Forces Joint Chiefs of Staff from 1989 to 1993 and United States Secretary of State from 2001 to 2005. Besides him, Condoleezza Rice was nominated Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs from 2001 to 2004 and Secretary of State from 2005 to 2009. Furthermore, Ron Brown was United States Secretary of Commerce from 1993 to 1996. The work of that people demonstrates the increasing visibility African-Americans have been achieving within the political context in the United States.

But certainly the most significant victory concerning African-American politics was the election of Barack Obama as the 44th President of the United States on November 4, 2008. I believe it is fundamental to make a reference to this event, since it is actually a result of all the effort and the struggles that were carried out by African-Americans throughout the twentieth century and, more specifically, during the Civil Rights Era. In the occasion of his election, Obama, the Democratic candidate, got a striking victory over Republican John McCain in the US presidential election. Obama won the election in 26 states and his national margin in the popular vote was about ten million.

Besides the racial question, the Obama's election can also be interpreted as a massive repudiation of the Bush presidency, the Republican Party and the long-term right-orientated domination in US politics. It was surely a historical election, which reflects, in the electoral context, the massive demographic, socio-economic and cultural changes which happened during the previous decades.

More significantly, the result of that election proved that little by little racism is getting down in the United States and that society is gradually becoming a little more democratic. According to the polls made at the time, only a very small percentage of the people who voted for Obama stated that the

issue of race exerted any influence on their vote. Instead, under the impact of war, financial crisis and deepening recession, millions of US citizens, in a completely rational manner, voted to express their democratic and essentially egalitarian aspirations. The same polls also demonstrated that two-thirds of the young people voted for Obama.

Barack Obama's election also had a very high impact outside the United States as well. Since the country was living (and still is, to a certain extent) a very delicate situation, involving the Global Crisis and the shortcomings of the War against Islam, the election of a black president represented the hope that a new international policy would be taken after George W. Bush's controversial and turbulent presidency.

In regard to Literature, African-American literature has been reaching a much better position since books by some black writers have continually been achieving status of best-sellers and winning different literary prizes. This is also the time when the work of African-American writers begin to be accepted by the academic scenario as a kind of "legitimate" within US literature.

At the end of the century, some African-American authors began to achieve international recognition. That is the case of Toni Morrison. In addition to producing literary works, she also helped to promote African-American literature and its authors since she worked as an editor for Random House and so she had the opportunity to edit books by relevant authors. Besides Morrison, Alice Walker also became famous worldwide. These two authors were actually the ones who managed to achieve more success both in the United States and abroad and also received very relevant prizes. For instance, Alice Walker received the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award for *The Color Purple* (1982) in the year of 1983. In turn, Toni Morrison received the Pulitzer Prize for *Beloved* (1987) in the year of 1988 and the Nobel Prize for Literature in the year of 1993.

Other important writers in this period include, among others, Gayl Jones, Rasheed Clark, Ishmael Reed, Jamaica Kincaid, Randall Kenan, and John Edgar Wideman. African-American poets have also garnered attention. Maya Angelou read a poem at Bill Clinton's inauguration, Rita Dove won a Pulitzer Prize and was Poet Laureate of the United States from 1993 to 1995, and Cyrus



Cassells's *Soul Make a Path through Shouting* (1994) was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize in 1994. Not so famous poets like Thylas Moss have also been praised for their innovative work. As for the theater, notable black playwrights include Ntozake Shange, who wrote *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf* (1975), Ed Bullins, Suzan-Lori Parks and August Wilson, who won two Pulitzer Prizes for his plays. Most recently, Edward P. Jones won the Pulitzer Prize in 2004 for Fiction for *The Known World* (2003).

Furthermore, it is a good idea to make reference to young African-American novelists who include David Anthony Durham, Tayari Jones, Kalisha Buckhanon, Mat Johnson, ZZ Packer and Colson Whitehead, among others. Some African-American writers also produced science fiction, fantasy and horror, as for example, Samuel R. Delany, Octavia E. Butler, Steven Barnes, Tananarive Due, Robert Fleming, Brandon Massey, Charles R. Saunders, John Ridley, John M. Faucette and Sheree Thomas.

It is also interesting to point out that African-American Literature has gained some more attention also due the work of Oprah Winfrey (already mentioned above) in her talk show, which continuously promotes black literature through the medium of Oprah's Book Club. Sometimes, she has brought African-American writers to a much larger audience than they had ever received in their lives.

In addition to that, in the last decades of the century there was a very considerable ascension of black actors and actresses in films and TV series. Among them, it is possible to mention Eddie Murphy, Denzel Washington, Will Smith, Morgan Freeman, Wesley Snipes, Whoopy Goldberg, Angela Basset and Raven-Symoné. These artists managed to achieve a relevant success and even take part in best-selling movies worldwide as main characters. This situation shows that the prejudice concerning black artists is little by little getting down and that they are getting more acceptance by the audiences within the artistic scenario.

So, the end of the twentieth century, in a way, consolidated the progress which was achieved by the African-American people in the United States all over the century. Many important improvements also happened throughout that

period and they actually served to reinforce the value and the importance that the black people have within the American society.

### 3 – AFRICAN-AMERICANS IN THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY LITERATURE

Considering the previous ideas, my objective in this chapter is working straight with the three authors chosen and their respective literary works. At this moment, I will work with each of them separately, so as to provide a more profound and comprehensive view of the works themselves in relation to the respective context of each one.

#### 3.1 – *Cane*, Jean Toomer and The Harlem Renaissance

Jean Toomer's most important feature is surely his mixed racial descent, which led him to fragmentation. Differently from almost all the authors from The Harlem Renaissance, Toomer did not have only an African-American origin and had a lifetime deeply marked by a great number of changes.

Jean Toomer was born in Washington D.C. on December 26, 1894, under the name of Nathan Pichback Toomer. Shortly after his birth, Toomer's father (Nathan Toomer, a Caucasian) deserted his wife (Nina Pinchback, Black descendant) and his son. Thus, Nina and Jean went to live with Jean's grandfather, P.B.S. Pinchback, and at that time Jean used the name Eugene Pinchback Toomer. Later on, he officially shortened his name to Jean. The Pinchbacks lived in a racially mixed neighborhood, but in during his early childhood, Jean used to attend the all-black Garnet Elementary School. In 1906, Nina, a new husband, and Jean moved to New Rochelle, New York. There they lived in a white neighborhood and Jean attended an all-white school. However, in 1909, Nina died and Jean moved back to Washington and his grandparents. He later attended the good quality all-black Dunbar High School. After graduation in 1914, he renounced racial classifications and preferred to live not as a member of any racial group, but only as an American. This refusal on the part of Toomer to live underneath a determined racial classification or maybe a

kind of “racial label” shows the difficulties that he had to affirm himself as being part of a specific group within the US society.

From 1914 to 1917, Jean Toomer travelled to different cities. Actually, he studied at six places of higher education in a period of less than four years. At the University of Wisconsin (1914-1915), he studied Agriculture. Half a year later, he decided to leave Wisconsin and continue his Agriculture studies in Massachusetts, at the Massachusetts College of Agriculture. In the following year, he changed his mind and decided to move to Chicago in order to study Fitness and Biology at the American College of Physical Training and at the University of Chicago. In 1917, he changed his mind again and moved to New York, where he studied History and Sociology at the City College of New York and at New York University. In spite of so many different courses and Universities, Toomer never got a degree.

After that time, he lived for some time in Sparta, a small city located in the state of Georgia, where he worked in many different functions, such as salesman, librarian, clerk, school principal, among others. There he had bitter experiences in what it comes to racism and segregation and this led him to become closer to his African roots. At that moment, more specifically in 1922, he started writing poems, short stories and sketches about topics involving exactly that topic of his African origins. Also around that time, he met Waldo Frank, who became his very close friend and provided him with a great deal of help as a mentor as far as his literary production was concerned. Actually, while Toomer was still living in Chicago, he began to get interested in Literature. So, in 1923, he finally produced *Cane*, his first literary text, which is considered his most memorable work.

In the years that followed, Toomer encountered difficulties to continue his literary production. He actually had more literary productions, specially poems and short stories, but he did not produce anything so relevant as *Cane*, thus finishing his career as a writer in 1949. Within his personal life, he married several times, moved again to different cities and eventually got involved with religious issues, especially concerning the Quakers. He died in 1967 in New York after several years of poor health.

Going back to the literary work in question, all these different kinds of knowledge he acquired all over his trips, studies, works and life experiences helped him to shape his writings, especially *Cane*. The following quotation provides some considerations about this:

It was during these years [1914-1917], however, that he [Jean Toomer] was preparing to be a writer, by attending off-campus lectures on naturalism, atheism, psychology, evolution and socialism and by reading numerous philosophical and literary works, such as those by William Shakespeare, George Santayana, Charles Baudelaire, William Blake, Sherwood Anderson, Leo Tolstoy, and all the major American poets, especially the imagists. In 1920 he met Waldo Frank, who introduced him to several literary circles and later wrote an extremely laudatory introduction to the first edition of *Cane*. (AMERICAN COUNCIL OF LEARNED SOCIETIES, 1999, p. 3330)

So, as we can see, *Cane* is deeply influenced by the great diversity of its author's life and could be even seen as a reflection of Toomer's fragmentation. As a matter of fact, it was written within the context of Modernism and The Harlem Renaissance. Due to its completely fragmented structure, it is rather difficult to classify it as belonging to a specific literary genre. Thus, it can be better qualified as a collection of different artistic and literary expressions (mainly poems, descriptions, short narratives, drama and even pictures) that examine the African-American condition both in the South of the United States and in Washington, D.C. around the time of its publication. In spite of the date of its publication, *Cane* is considered by most critics as a Postmodernist work rather than a Modernist one, due to its clear Postmodern characteristics, such as its highly fragmented structure, the fact that it dialogues with the past, and the mix of literary genres that it presents. That is also a reason why I intend to analyze it in the light of Postmodern theories.

Some critics would classify it as novel, however it cannot exactly be classified this way since its three parts do not follow a continuing plot and do not form a unified and joined narrative. On the other hand, the high poetic diction would lead some other critics to look upon it as a poem (or even a novel-poem), but it is not the case as well. Because of that, I actually do not refer to *Cane* as a *novel* or as a *narrative*, but simply as a *work*. Despite the difficulty to give an accurate classification to the book, most critics agree that *Cane* is one of the masterpieces of The Harlem Renaissance and one of the most influential books of the time. As Robert Bone affirms, "By far the most impressive product of the Negro Renaissance [another name for The Harlem Renaissance], *Cane* ranks

with Richard Wright's *Native Son* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* as a measure of the Negro novelist's highest achievement." (1958, p. 149).

*Cane* consists of three parts. As I mentioned before, considering its formal aspect, it is very visible that the book has a deeply fragmented structure, comprising different literary genres, so I believe it is important to provide a general view about each one of the three parts. Part One is composed of sixteen chapters which use a natural and rural setting to create different portraits of six southern women and this way convey different ideas. For example, "Karintha" (chapter 1), "Becky" (chapter 4), "Carma" (chapter 7), and "Fern" (chapter 10) show the richness of a transitory life, while the use of images like ghosts, full moons, and fire in "Esther" (chapter 13) and "Blood-Burning Moon" (chapter 16) can be interpreted as the dissolution of life. As for the structure of the chapters, they can be classified in the following way: 1) poem/prose/poem/prose/song/prose/poem; 2) poem; 3) poem; 4) prose; 5) poem; 6) song; 7) poem/prose/song; 8) song; 9) poem; 10) prose; 11) poem; 12) song; 13) prose; 14) poem; 15) poem and 16) prose/poem/prose/poem/prose/poem.

Part Two is composed of twelve chapters. Contrary to Part One, they all have urban settings, more specifically, Washington, D.C. and Chicago. The black people of this section, descendants and survivors of the black southern culture and the post-civil war world, are seeking for a new life in the urban North. The classification of the structure of the chapters may be like: 1) poem/prose/poem; 2) prose/poem/prose/poem; 3) prose; 4) poem; 5) poem; 6) drama; 7) poem; 8) prose; 9) drama; 10) poem; 11) song and 12) prose.

Part Three, the last section, named "Kabnis", brings the themes of both Parts One and Two together. It is a play whose setting shifts back to the rural South and dramatizes the conflicts of Ralph Kabnis, an educated confused black artist struggling to represent the parting soul of the African-American past in art.

The following excerpt, taken from Part One, provides us with a good example of the way in which *Cane* represents the reality of the African-American people at that time:

Karintha, at twelve, was a wild flash that told the other folks just what it was to live. At sunset, when there was no wind, and the pine-smoke from over by the sawmill hugged the earth, and couldnt see more than a feet in front, her sudden darting past you was a bit of vivid color, *like a black bird that flashes in light*. With the other children one could hear, some distance off, *their feet flopping in the two-inch dust*. Karintha'a running was a whirl. It had the sound of the red dust that sometimes makes a spiral in the road (...) *She stoned cows, and beat her dog, and fought the other children...* Even the preacher, who caught her at mischief, told himself that *she was innocently lovely as a November cotton flower*. (TOOMER, 1993, p. 1, my emphasis)

In this passage, the situation of this child tells us a lot when it comes to the situation of children in that society. Karintha is a character that represents very well the reality of African-American children at that time and the living conditions which they were exposed to. It is important to highlight, though, the way Toomer portrays such reality.

If we pay very close attention to the kind of language and the images he uses, we are able to notice a high level of poetic and, in a way, romantic tone. In this excerpt, Toomer makes many references to elements of nature, such as the sunset, the wind, a pine-smoke, the earth and a black bird. In addition to that, the author constructs several images, like “the pine-smoke from over by the sawmill hugged the earth”, “her sudden darting past you was a bit of vivid color, like a black bird that flashes in light”, and “Karintha'a running was a whirl”. At first, these references and images would give a certain bucolic tone to the passage, since references and images related to nature are generally associated bucolism and a kind of romanticized view of life.

However, as we continue reading the passage, this bucolic and romantic view changes completely. When we focus on its content and pay close attention to some details, it is possible to infer other characteristics. For example, “their [the children's] feet flopping in the two-inch dust” leads us to understand that the children portrayed in that passage lived in inadequate living conditions. Also in this excerpt, it is possible to infer some characteristics of the education given to the children, revealing how poor and deficient it was. This situation is made very clear in the sentence “She [Karintha] stoned cows, and beat her dog, and fought the other children”, which shows that Karintha had harsh and naughty habits for a child of her age and, even more serious than that, did not get any kind of punishment for that, as it is implicit in “Even the preacher, who caught her at

mischief, told himself that she was innocently lovely as a November cotton flower”.

So, this excerpt is a very clear example of this kind of duality that exists in *Cane* concerning form and content. Although the references and images would at first imply a certain bucolic and romantic tone, the content of the passage reveals exactly the opposite situation. This duality can also be found in this other excerpt from *Cane*, in fact a poem also taken from Part One, which is meaningful and strong too:

Song of the Son

Pour O pour that parting soul in song  
O pour it in the sawdust glow of night  
Into the velvet pine-smoke air tonight,  
And let the valley carry it along.  
And let the valley carry it along.

O land and soil, red soil and sweet-gum tree,  
So scant of grass, so proligate of pines,  
Now hush before an epoch's sun declines  
Thy son, in time, I have returned to thee,  
Thy son, I have in time returned to thee.

In time, for though the sun is setting on  
*A song-lit race of slaves, it has not set,*  
Though late, O soil, it is not too late yet  
To catch thy plaintive soul, leaving, soon gone,  
Leaving, to catch thy plaintive soul soon gone.

*O Negro slaves, dark purple ripened plums,  
Squeezed, and bursting in the pine-wood air,  
Passing, before they stripped the old tree bare  
One plum was saved for me, one seed becomes*

An everlasting song, a singing tree,  
*Caroling softly souls of slavery,*  
What they were, and what they are to me,  
*Caroling softly souls of slavery.* (TOOMER, 1993, p. 12, my emphasis)

I decided to include the whole poem because I believe it is a precise example of how a very harsh situation can be represented in such a poetical way. In this poem, Toomer also makes use of many poetic and romantic literary devices, as well as of a great metaphorical tone. At the same time, though, he is writing about a very serious issue: slavery.

Focusing on the aesthetic aspect of the poem, we can see that it also contains many references and images related to nature. For example, it is possible to find references to the night, the air, the land, the soil, different kinds of trees, the grass and the sun. It is very important to mention that nature plays a fundamental role within this poem, since the speaker uses it as his addressee



in some moments, as we can see, for example, in the second stanza. More than that, not only is nature an addressee, but also the speaker considers himself as its son, as it is made very clear, for instance, in the verse “Thy son, in time, I have returned to thee”. It is also a good idea to stress the kind of solemn tone in which nature is addressed, by the use of the pronouns “thy” and “thee”.

Nonetheless, if we pay close attention to its content, we see that one more time Toomer is dealing with a serious and harsh theme. As a matter of fact, the author makes use of all those images concerning nature in order to portray the topic of slavery. For instance, the verses “O Negro slaves, dark purple ripened plums / Squeezed, and bursting in the pine-wood air” present a very powerful image within this context, since it departs from a comparison between the Negro slaves and an element of nature, at first displayed in a positive and outstanding way (“dark purple ripened plums”), to convey their eventual destruction (“Squeezed, and bursting in the pine-wood air”). Continuing the poem, the speaker makes reference to a seed of one plum saved by himself, that would become an everlasting song, “Caroling softly souls of slavery”. This way the author constructs another very powerful image, since he combines the verb to carol, generally associated with Christmas or children songs (this way, one could say, happy songs), with “souls of slavery”, which implies a rather blue and melancholic tone.

So, it is possible to see that, as well as in the previous passage, Toomer also builds a kind of contrastive relation between the form and the content of this poem, making use of images traditionally employed in romantic or even joyful situation to represent a very serious, harsh and sorrowful issue.

Another reason that made me select some poems to analyze is that this kind of literature generally provides good opportunities to make reference to the relations between oral and written language. As Gates affirms, “The tension between oral and written plays itself out in one form as the two dominant narrative voices that serve as counterpoint in texts such as Jean Toomer’s *Cane*.” (GATES, 1989, p. 21-22). As a matter of fact, the use of many poems throughout the book is a literary device which puts more importance into the oral aspect of *Cane*. Since this writing is really a mix of literary genres and artistic expressions, it is fundamental that the author explores also the oral

elements within the book. The tension between the oral and the written aspects of this poem can be seen even more evidently in the verse “Caroling softly souls of slavery”. In addition to its content (as I discussed above), it also points out to the relation between music and literature, leaving clear, this way, its oral characteristic.

Actually, this way of depicting a very lamentable situation in a beautifully poetic way is present all over the book. Another example of this can be found in the next passage, also a poem taken from Part One:

Portrait in Georgia

Hair- braided chestnut,  
 coiled like a 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. (TOOMER, 1993, p. 27)

This poem is also a very strong example of the power of Toomer’s representation. First of all, it is important to pay attention to the title, especially to the word “Portrait”, since it reinforces the idea of *Cane* as a work with different forms of artistic manifestation. “Portrait” is mainly used to talk about paintings, and if we pay close attention to the structure of the poem, it actually resembles the description of a painting about a woman, focusing on specific details of her body: first her hair, then her eyes, later her lips, after her breath, and finally her body. It is also important to pay attention to the fact that it is not simply a portrait, but in fact a portrait *in Georgia*. Coming back to what I said before about Toomer’s biography, the moment when he lived in Sparta, Georgia, was exactly the moment when he faced very harsh and bitter manifestations of racism as well as segregation.

Considering the other elements of the poem, it is also striking to observe the use of strong decaying images and words that imply negative characteristics and even destruction, such as “fagots”, “scars”, “blisters” and “ash”. By using such images, the author achieves an aesthetically vivid effect.

However, differently from the two previous excerpts, in this one the images go along with the content they represent. Anyway, Toomer is indeed able to construct a very effective portrait of the evil situation experienced by African-Americans in such a society.

The following passage, which was extracted from Part Two, also brings a significant contribution within the context of the analysis that I am constructing. It is important to attentively take a look at it since it brings into the spotlight a very relevant issue.

*Life of nigger alleys, of pool rooms and restaurants and near-beer saloons soaks into the walls of Howard Theater and sets them throbbing jazz songs. Black-skinned, they dance and shout above the tick and trill of white-walled buildings. At night, they open doors to people who come in to stamp their feet and shout. At night, road-shows volley songs into the mass-heart of black people. Songs soak the walls and seep out to the nigger life of alleys and near-beer saloons, of the Poodle Dog and Black Bear cabarets. (TOOMER, 1993, p. 50, my emphasis)*

This excerpt is also a clear example of Toomer's representation of the hard routine of the black people at the time. The very setting depicted in the passage suggests very dark places, low-quality restaurants and bars, which attract people in search of bad drinking and maybe immoral activities. It is also possible to observe the use of rather evil images and words, such as "life of nigger alleys", "black-skinned", "mass-heart of black people" and "Black Bear cabarets".

Among the words and images in the excerpt above, I would like to highlight "and sets them [the black people] throbbing jazz songs", in which the verb to throb, used instead of the verb to sing, conveys the rather negative idea that the black people are even unable to sing properly and in such a harsh situation. Also, "At night, they [the pool rooms and restaurants] open doors to people who come in to stamp their [the black people's] feet and shout" implies the idea that the black people are even humiliated by the people who go to those places, which makes their situation even harsher.

In addition to that, it is important to pay special attention to the images the author engenders concerning the opposition black and white, for instance "Life of nigger alleys" in opposition to "white-walled buildings". The use of such images can be interpreted reinforcement to the idea of segregation which existed in that society and makes this situation very evident.

In the same way that in the previous excerpt, the next passage, taken from Part Two as well, is also very relevant:

Houses are shy girls whose eyes shine reticently upon the dusk body of the street. Upon the gleaming limbs and asphalt torso of a dreaming nigger. Open your liver lips to the lean, white spring. Stir the root-life of a withered people. Call them from their houses, and teach them to dream.

*Dark swaying forms of Negroes* are street songs that woo virginal houses.  
(TOOMER, 1993, p. 56, my emphasis)

In this excerpt, which is characterized by a very metaphorical tone, there is the opposition of images between black and white too, as we can see, for example, in “asphalt torso of a dreaming nigger” and “white spring”. Besides that, it is a good idea to take into consideration the images constructed in “asphalt torso of a dreaming nigger” (also referred to before in this paragraph) and “Dark swaying forms of Negroes”, since they present the image of the negro in a more contemporary and abstract way, but also expressing the feelings of African-Americans toward the situations they lived.

The following passage, which is also taken from Part Two, presents a quite interesting sample of the representation of the reality of African-Americans during that time:

Prayer

My body is opaque to the soul,  
Driven of the spirit, long have I sought to temper it unto the spirit's  
longing.  
But my mind, too, is opaque to the soul.  
A closed lid is my soul's flesh-eye.  
O Spirits of whom my soul is but a little finger,  
Direct it to the lid of its flesh-eye.  
I am weak with much giving.  
I am weak with the desire to give more.  
(How strong a thing is the little finger!)  
So weak that I have confused the body with the soul,  
And the body with its little finger.  
(How frail is the little finger.)  
My voice could not carry to you did you dwell in stars,  
O Spirits of whom my soul is but a little finger... (TOOMER, 1993, p. 68)

First of all, it is fundamental to consider the title of this excerpt: “Prayer”. By using this title, the author implies a certain religiosity or maybe a kind of approximation with divinity. Besides that, prayer, prayers might even be considered as a specific kind of literary genre, which would contribute to the wide range of literary genres present in *Cane*.

In this prayer, the presence of elements, words and images associated with religion is very clear, such as the opposition that the author constructs among “body”, “mind” and soul” in the verses, for example, as “My body is opaque to the soul” and “But my mind, too, is opaque to the soul”. This opposition corroborates with the idea of fragility and weakness that the speaker conveys all over the prayer, which can be seen very clearly in the verses, for

instance, “I am weak with much giving”, “O Spirits of whom my soul is but a little finger” and “So weak that I have confused the body with the soul, / And the body with its little finger”. Actually this image of the little finger is a very powerful one, since it strongly represents the feeling of insignificance or maybe the very little importance that the African-American people used to have within that society.

Unfortunately, the matter of religion is also associated with the question of oppression lived by the black people in that society, since it was also an instrument that served to reinforce prejudice and discrimination towards that people, and with this prayer, Toomer is able to apprehend and represent this feeling very effectively.

The passage below, extracted from Part Three, is also of great value in relation to the analysis I am doing:

(...) he [Ralph Kabnis] thrusts open the outside door and steps out into the serene loveliness of Georgian autumn moonlight. Some distance off, down in the valley, a band of pine-smoke, silvered gauze, drifts steadily. The half-moon is a white child that sleeps upon the tree-tops of the forest. White winds croon its sleep-song:

rock a-by baby . .  
 Black mother sways, holding a white child on her bosom.  
 when the bough bends . .  
 Her breath hums through pine-cones.  
 Cradle will fall . .  
 Teat moon-children at your breasts,  
 Down will come baby . .  
 Black mother. (TOOMER, 1993, p. 82)

Firstly, it is clear to observe that this excerpt presents fragmentation in terms of its formal aspect, since it starts with a part in prose and then moves into a song. It is also important to pay attention to the image constructed by the author, involving a very beautifully composed natural setting, located, as a matter of fact, in Georgia. The presence of nature is very intense in this passage, with some elements like the moonlight, a valley, some trees, the forest and the wind. It is also interesting to observe that the song is not really *sung*, but *crooned*, by the wind, which gives an even more romanticized tone this excerpt.

As for its content, although the image is in fact wonderful, it depicts a black woman holding a white baby. It is interesting to observe that the white child is associated metaphorically with the moon, as it is implicit, for instance, in

the verse “Teat moon-children at your breasts”. Seen by this point of view, the opposition of black and white in this excerpt could have a double meaning: it could stand for the opposition between the white child and the black woman, but it also could stand for the opposition between the moon and the night. Anyway, it reflects the white supremacy over black people, since it is possible to observe that the moon/the white child are represented in a central way in the passage, whereas the night/the black woman are represented in a rather secondary way, just to serve as a kind of support, to reinforce and highlight the beauty of the white.

Continuing on Part Three, I would like to analyse the two excerpts below which, according to my point of view, are somehow connected and present some elements in common:

Lewis: I think I can give him that. That note was not meant for me. Some Negroes have grown uncomfortable at my being here –

Kabnis: You mean, Mr. Lewis, some colored folks threw it? Christ Almighty!

Halsey: Thats what he means. An just as I told y. White folks more direct than that.

Kabnis: What are they after you for?

Lewis: It is a long story, Kabnis. Too long for now. And it might involve present company. (He laughs pleasantly and gestures vaguely in the direction of Hanby.) Tell you about it later perhaps.

Kabnis: Youre not going?

Lewis: Not till my month's up.

Halsey: Hows that?

Lewis: I'm on a sort of contract with myself. (Is about to leave.) Well, glad is nothing serious – (TOOMER, 1993, p. 95)

Kabnis: Cant keep a good man down. Those words I was telling y about, they wont fit int th mold that's branded on m soul. Rhyme, y see? Poet, too. Bad rhyme. Bad poet. Somethin else you've learned tonight. Lewis don't know it all, an I'm atelling y. Ugh. Th form that's burned int my soul is some twisted awful thing that crept in from a dream, a godam nightmare, an wont stay still unless I feed it. An it lives on words. Not beautiful words. God Almighty no. Mishappen, split-gut, tortured, twisted words. Layman was feeding it back there that day you thought I ran out fearing things. White folks feed it cause their looks are words. Niggers, black niggers feed it cause theyre evil an their looks are words. Yallar niggers feed it. This whole damn bloated purple country feeds it cause its going down t hell in a holy avalanche of words. I want t feed th soul – I know what that is; th preachers don't – but I've got t feed it. I wish t God some lynching white man ud stick his knife through it an pin it to a tree. An pin it to a tree. You hear me? That's a wish f y, you little snot-nosed pups who've been making fun of me, an fakin that I'm weak. Me, Ralph Kabnis weak. Ha.  
(TOOMER, 1993, p. 110)

The first aspect which calls greater attention within these two passages is certainly the language employed by Toomer. Of course, it is a device used by the author to provide a more characteristic form of language to the African-American people. As examples of this different kind of language, I can cite:

“youre”, “hows”, “wont”, “y”, “int”, “somethin”, “tnight”, “th” and “ud”. They are not really different words, but different spellings of already existing words and they actually serve to mark and reinforce the way that black people used the English language to express their feelings and problems in their own way.

In addition to the matter of language, these two passages are also very strong when it comes to represent the most important conflicts which existed between the blacks and the whites within that society. In the two excerpts, there are references to both blacks and whites and to the conflicting relation they had. For instance, the sentences “Some Negroes have grown uncomfortable at my being here –”, “(...) White folks more direct than that. / Kabnis: What are they after you for?”, and “White folks feed it cause their looks are words. Niggers, black niggers feed it cause theyre evil an their looks are words” convey a very problematic way of dealing between black people and white people. Along with that, the sentences “Rhyme, y see? Poet, too. Bad rhyme. Bad poet. Somethin else you’ve learned tnight. Lewis don’t know it all, an I’m atelling y. Ugh” and “You hear me? That’s a wish f y, you little snot-nosed pups who’ve been making fun of me, an fakin that I’m weak. Me, Ralph Kabnis weak. Ha.” clearly show that Kabnis is being very ironical towards the opinion that some white people have in relation to his work. He denies the idea that his production is bad, gets revolted with this situation and strongly affirms that it is not true.

Thus, considering the analysis presented so far, I believe it is clear the way in which *Cane* deals with the reality of African-Americans in the context of The Harlem Renaissance. I could have chosen a very wide range of other passages from the book to analyse, but I think the excerpts chosen are already enough to provide a considerably broad idea concerning this topic.

### **3.2 – Baraka, *Dutchman*, and The Civil Rights Era**

Baraka experienced this social and political context of The Civil Rights Era and was deeply marked by it. He is a very enthusiastic political activist and, as a consequence, his literary production is generally characterized by a heavy

political and critical tone concerning American society, which makes it extremely polemic and controversial. He not only produced plays, but also poems, essays and musical criticism, and he is an actor and a University professor too. A very important consideration about his name is that in 1967, he decided to change it for Imamu Amiri Baraka, in an attempt to get an approximation with his African origins. That is why I am personally inclined to refer to him as Baraka, not as Jones.

Born Everett LeRoi Jones in New Jersey, 1934, he had access to a good education. He studied Philosophy and Religious Studies at Rutgers University, Columbia University and Howard University without obtaining a degree. In 1954, he joined the US Air Force, reaching the rank of sergeant. After an anonymous letter to his commanding officer accusing him of being a communist, which led to the discovery of Soviet writings, Baraka was severely punished. In that same year he moved to Greenwich Village, working initially in a warehouse for music records. His interest in jazz began in that period. At the same time he came into contact with the incipient movement of the Beat Poets, which was going to have a powerful influence on his early poetry. In 1958, Baraka founded Totem Press, which published such Beat icons as Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg. In that same year he married Hettie Cohen and with her became joint editor of the *Yugen* literary magazine. He also worked as a clerk at the Gotham Book Mart, where he came into contact with many other well-known authors and poets.

In 1960 he went to Cuba, a visit that initiated his transformation into a politically active artist. In 1961 he published *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note*, which was followed in 1963 by *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*. This work is until nowadays considered one of the most influential volumes of jazz criticism, especially in regard to the Free Jazz movement, which was just beginning at that time. He published *Dutchman* in 1964 and received an Obie Award in that same year. After the assassination of Malcolm X, Baraka broke free from the Beat Poets. He left his wife and their two children and moved to Harlem, considering himself at that time a *black cultural nationalist*. In 1966, Baraka married his second wife, who later adopted the name Amina Baraka. In 1967 he became a lecturer at San Francisco State University. In 1968, he was arrested in Newark for supposedly carrying an



illegal weapon and resisting arrest during riots following the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. He was sentenced to three years in prison, but shortly afterwards he was set free. In that same year he published *Black Music*, his second book of jazz criticism, more specifically, a collection of previously published music journalism. In 1970 he strongly supported Kenneth Gibson's candidacy for mayor of Newark and he was elected the city's first Afro-American Mayor.

Around 1974, Baraka distanced himself from Black Nationalism and became a Marxist and a supporter of anti-imperialist third world liberation movements. In 1979 he became a lecturer at SUNY-Stony Brook for the *Africana Studies Department*, and was greatly admired by his students. In that same year, after altercations with his wife, he was sentenced to a short period of compulsory community service. Around this time he began writing his autobiography.

In 1984 Baraka became a full professor at Rutgers University. In 1987, together with Maya Angelou and Toni Morrison, he was a speaker at the commemoration ceremony for James Baldwin. In 1989 he won an American Book Award for his works as well as a Langston Hughes Award. In 1990 he co-authored the autobiography of Quincy Jones, and 1998 was a supporting actor in Warren Beatty's film *Bulworth*. Baraka collaborated with hip hop group 'The Roots' on the song "Something in the Way of Things (In Town)" on their 2002 album Phrenology. Also in 2002, scholar Molefi Kete Asante listed Amiri Baraka on his list of 100 Greatest African-Americans.

Specifically concerning drama, Baraka was an opposer of the so-called *digestive theater*, which is based on the idea that people would have dinner and then would watch a light play just to relax while their stomach would digest the food. Baraka's plays are in fact exactly the opposite of this, totally "*undigestive*". That is one more reason why his plays caused such a big shock to that society, since they would go totally against people's expectations. As a matter of fact, it is important to highlight that the author was even arrested because of his play *The Toilet*, which was considered absolutely immoral and subversive.

Probably that is why Kimberly Benston claims that "Baraka entered the American consciousness not merely as a writer but as an event" (BENSTON,

apud COHN, 1989, p. 95). Undoubtedly, he is one of the most significant African-American writers, since his critiques still remain very contemporary and his plays still shock society.

As for *Dutchman*, the play was first performed in New York in 1964. Like most of Baraka's plays, it is hard, strong and shocking. It has basically two characters: Clay, a young black man, and Lula, a young white woman. Probably its most striking characteristic is the intense feeling of rage and anger that permeates the whole work. Along with that, an environment of seduction and sexuality is also constructed throughout the play, as it is possible to see in the following excerpt:

LULA You're probably on your way to his house now.  
 CLAY That's right.  
 LULA  
 [Putting her hand on Clay's closest knee, drawing it from the knee up to the thigh's hinge, then removing it, watching his face very closely, and continuing to laugh, perhaps more gently than before]  
 Dull, dull, dull. I bet you think I'm exciting.  
 CLAY You're O.K.  
 LULA Am I exciting you now?  
 CLAY Right. That's not what is supposed to happen?  
 LULA How do I know?  
 [She returns her hand, without moving it, then takes it away and plunges it in her bag to draw out an apple]  
 You want this?  
 CLAY Sure.  
 LULA  
 [She gets one out of the bag for herself]  
 Eating apples together is always the first step. Or walking up uninhabited Seventh Avenue in the twenties on weekends.  
 [Bites and giggles, glancing at Clay and speaking in loose sing-song]  
 Can you get involved... boy! Get us involved. Um-huh.  
 [Mock seriousness]  
 Would you like to get involved with me, Mister Man?  
 CLAY  
 [Trying to be as flippant as Lula, whacking happily at the apple]  
 Sure. Why not? A beautiful woman like you. Huh, I'd be a fool not to.  
 (JONES, 1971, p. 11)

It is interesting to observe the role that this sexual appeal performs along the play. As it is clear in this passage, Lula makes deliberately seduces Clay in order to get an approximation with him. It is also possible to see that Lula does not do it in order to have a love affair with him, but actually just to get involved with him. So, Lula does not want Clay's *love*, she just wants Clay's *involvement*. Another element that must be taken into consideration is the apple. This fruit is generally associated with seduction (which is actually taking place in this passage), but it also carries a religious connotation. It is important to remember that, according to the Holy Bible, it was an apple the fruit that was offered by the

snake to Adam and Eve in order to seduce them, to make them fall into temptation, and eventually cause their destruction. Concerning *Dutchman*, it is indeed possible to make this association with the Biblical facts, because in this play Lula exactly seduces Clay exactly to destruct him and, as Michelle Williams affirms, “The play (...) expresses the racial anger and suppressed hostility of both races. The play attempts to show how the very thing that tempts a person is the very thing that could cause his death” (WILLIAMS, 2010). It is also possible to establish a link between this situation and the matter of oppression which exists in the play. The destruction that Lula want to inflict on Clay is not limited to his character only. Actually, it can be considered a representation of the destruction that white people must inflict on black people. It is not just a question of a person longing to kill another person; rather, it is a much more complex one. By portraying this situation, Baraka metaphorically depicts the very troubled relation between blacks and whites.

As a matter of fact, all the action in the play happens on a subway car in a summer day. Due to this setting, a feeling of heat and suffocation is left clear since the very beginning. As a matter of fact, the author provides a detailed description of the setting before the beginning of the action.

Within this topic, it is a good idea to pay attention to very first sentence that Baraka uses in the description of the setting of the play: “*In the flying underbelly of the city. Steaming hot, and summer on top, outside. Underground. The subway heaped in modern myth*” (JONES, 1971, p. 3, my emphasis). It is interesting to observe the images that the author constructs within this passage. For instance, “the flying underbelly of the city” is a quite representative one. The word “flying” could be more immediately understood as a reference to the speed of the subway, so it is the word “underbelly” that deserves more attention. It is necessary to focus on the possible meanings of the word. One of them would be the underside of animal’s body. Looking through this point of view, we could understand that the author considers the city as an animal and the subway as its underside. This way, Baraka would convey a rather derogatory and negative view towards the city and, probably, to society. Another possible meaning for this word may be a vulnerable or unprotected part. This meaning is also well applicable to this situation. As a matter of fact, that place proves to be a very

vulnerable and even dangerous place for Clay, because there he suffers all kinds of attacks from Lula and does not get any kind of protection. Also within this topic, it is a good idea to consider that

In Amiri Baraka's play *Dutchman*, Baraka utilizes metaphor, imagery, and irony to portray society as a machine, the strongest of which is Baraka's emphasis on the subway car as a metaphor for the perpetual forward motion and inescapability of racist, bigoted societal norms. (DESLAURIERS, 2010)

The metaphor of the subway is indeed a powerful one since it is another element that reinforces the oppression suffered by the black people. The setting of a subway car, especially one with a great deal of heat and suffocation, can actually be interpreted in a rather negative way, conveying the idea that society may suffocate a man, even more if we consider that he does not fit in the patterns that this society established.

Furthermore, it is also important to focus on "The subway heaped in modern myth", since it conveys another relevant image. Firstly, it is necessary to pay attention to the verb "to heap", which in this case could be replaced for "full of", or maybe "filled up with". The great question in this sentence would be, so, why the subway would be filled up with "modern myth". By using this image, Baraka creates a kind of device to give a new aspect to the play and also a different look to the characters, who would become, in a certain way, "mythological characters" (but not in the classical point of view, of course).

Talking about the structure of the play, it is constituted of two acts. In Act I, there is the first contact between the characters. Clay is already on his seat, Lula enters the subway car, they exchange looks and Lula sits right beside him. Clay is very well dressed and Lula more simply dressed. She starts seducing him. After this initial moment of seduction and a short conversation, she begins showing all her prejudice and oppression towards him, insulting and harassing him all the time. In this first act, only the two characters are visible.

In Act II, the whole subway car becomes visible and Lula's actions grow continually insane. At the same time, her insults and other demonstrations of discrimination gradually become harsher. She eventually slays Clay, asking the other passengers in the subway car to help her throw his body away. After all that, the play finishes when another black young man enters the subway car, sits near Lula and exchanges a look with her.

As a matter of fact, as Cohn states, “The brilliance of *Dutchman* lies in a fusion of symbolism and realism.” (COHN, 1989, p. 95). The setting of the play is actually a quite realistic one, the situations presented are not really far from reality and a situation similar to that could in fact have really taken place in real life. On the other hand, the play is constituted by a great number of symbolic and metaphoric elements, and provides a very accurate representation of the social relations concerning blacks and whites in the US society.

Since I am discussing a play, it is very important to consider the ideas of very important theoreticians concerning theater. I would like to begin making reference to some excerpts by Aristotle. But before citing him, it is a good idea to make it clear that, although he is a classical author and he wrote a lot about tragedy, some of his ideas are completely applicable to the context of my dissertation.

To begin with, it is fundamental to consider Aristotle’s view. Talking about the characters, the author states that “Since the objects of imitation are men in action, and these men must be either of a higher or a lower type (...) it follows that we must represent men either as better than in real life, or as worse, or as they are” (1997, p. 3). If we think about *Dutchman*, it is possible to affirm that Baraka aims at representing his characters similarly to the reality they actually live in. This way, the idea that the characters would provide a better or worse representation of mankind, as it is traditional in the classical tragedies and comedies, does not hold true for Baraka’s writings.

Besides that, I will consider the excerpt “And since the pleasure which the poet should afford is that which comes from pity and fear through imitation, it is evident that this quality must be impressed upon the incidents” (ARISTOTLE, 1997, p. 56). This passage has a big relation with *Dutchman*, since if we consider the summary of the play that I provided above, the events that happen throughout it are very shocking and create a striking reaction from the audience. This way, the sequence of facts produced by the author is a very powerful element of this work that helps in the construction of a very efficient mimesis and, consequently, a strong catharsis.

Another excerpt that should be considered is “The perfection of style is to be clear without being mean. The clearest style is that which uses only

current or proper words” (ARISTOTLE, 1997, p. 77). This passage is also very useful concerning this play since it refers to the question of the use of language. Exactly like Aristotle points out, Baraka makes use of common language all over this play, but he does not do that in a vulgar way. On the contrary, he uses common language in a way that it expresses very clearly the feeling and emotions of the people in the play, thus creating a vivid atmosphere within the work. This way, it is possible to say that he achieves the sense of elevation which Aristotle mentions in the excerpt above.

Another very important author to work with is Bertold Brecht. Some of his theoretical ideas are related to a very fundamental feature of the play: its approximation with reality. More specifically, this idea is present when the author speaks about everyday theater, as in the following excerpt:

Como é útil, sério e divertido um teatro assim [teatro quotidiano],  
 E que digno! Não se trata de papagaios nem de símios,  
 A imitam por amor da imitação, indiferentes  
 Ao que imitam, só para mostrar que sabem imitar bem.  
 Trata-se de pessoas com um propósito bem determinado.  
 (...)  
 A vossa maneira de produzir teatro deve ser  
 Reconduzida à realidade... (1957, p. 265-266, 289) <sup>7</sup>

In this passage, the author emphasizes the importance of the more popular forms of theater in regard to the more classical ones. When he says that the objective of everyday theater is not imitation and that it has a very clear purpose, by analogy, I may say he actually goes straight into the main characteristics of *Dutchman*. So, although Brecht is a more traditional author and his works are mostly about classical plays, it is indeed possible to make this link between this idea specifically and the work of Baraka.

As I had already shown above, Baraka definitely did not have the objective of simply portraying the reality of the African-American people. Much more than that, he wanted not only to display that reality, but also to reflect upon it and, most of all, criticize it in a strong and harsh way.

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7 How useful, serious and funny is a theater like this [everyday theater]  
 And how respectable it is! It is not about parrots or monkeys  
 Imitating just for the sake of imitation, indifferent  
 About the things they imitate, just to show how well they can imitate them.  
 It is about people with a very well defined purpose.  
 (...)  
 Your way of producing theater must be  
 Thrown upon reality.

Focusing now on some specific elements of the play itself, it is important to make some considerations concerning the very name of the male character: Clay. At first sight, this must seem a rather unimportant detail, but in fact I would say that this name was not chosen by chance. The basic definitions of the word “clay” can refer to the kind of soil used for making brick or the body of a dead person. If we consider the first definition, the character of Clay could be associated with the land, the soil, something very primitive and even disgusting. Still, if we consider the second definition, I could even suggest that it is a kind of foreshadowing, since Clay (the character) eventually becomes a clay (the body of a dead person). Anyway, in both definitions the idea of *oppression* is present, since either Clay is seen as a primitive or disgusting thing or he is killed.

The following excerpt taken from the play provides a clear example of the conflict which exists between black people and white people within that society. It is actually a part of an argument between Clay and Lula and has a very relevant content:

LULA Everything you say is wrong (...) What've you got that jacket and tie on in all this heat for? And why're you wearing a jacket and tie like that? Did your people ever burn witches or start revolutions over the price of tea? Boy, those narrow-shoulder clothes come from a tradition you ought to feel *oppressed* by. A three-button suit. *What right do you have* to be wearing a three-button suit and stripped tie? *Your grandfather was a slave*, he didn't go to Harvard.  
 CLAY My grandfather was a night watchman.  
 LULA And you went to a colored college where everybody thought they were Averell Harriman.  
 CLAY All except me.  
 LULA And who did you think you were? Who do you think you are now?  
 CLAY  
 [Laughs as if to make light of the whole trend of conversation]  
 Well, in college I thought I was Baudelaire. But I've slowed down since.  
 LULA *I bet you never once thought you were a black nigger.*  
 [Mock serious, then she howls with laughter. CLAY is stunned but after initial reaction, he quickly tries to appreciate the humor. LULA almost shrieks]  
*A black Baudelaire.* (JONES, 1971, p. 18-19, my emphasis)

This passage shows the oppression and prejudice very clearly demonstrated by Lula towards Clay. All over the passage, she humiliates him and puts great emphasis in his background full of handicaps. With this attitude, she tries to place Clay in a lower position than hers, this way trying to show him how inferior he would be. This can be clearly seen, for example, in the sentence “Everything you say is wrong”. By stating this, she completely ignores whatever he has to tell and talk to her, this way demonstrating her prejudice in a very harsh way. Also, in “Did your people ever burn witches or start revolutions over

the price of tea?”, she implies that the black people were totally unable to get engaged in social affairs or even organize a revolutionary movement of any kind, just like the English people did in the historical events she makes reference to. In this other sentence, “Your grandfather was a slave, he didn’t go to Harvard”, Lula brings into consideration a crucial aspect: the question of education. Within her way of thinking, the fact that Clay’s ancestors did not have a chance to get access to good education is an element that enables him to occupy a significant position within society.

Another important element to be analysed in this passage is the question of the clothes they wear. Clay is very well dressed, wearing a three-button suit and a striped tie. Because of that, it is possible to infer that in spite of his past, he managed to reach a more successful position than his ancestors. Lula, though, refuses to accept that. In this situation the question of stereotype is implicit. As we can see, Lula thinks that every black person would always be in a lower position and, consequently, a black person would never be able to wear clothes just like Clay is wearing in this passage. However, that is not what happens with him. This way, he breaks the stereotype that Lula has concerning black people and it causes a great deal of shock and indignation in Lula. This is certainly one of the reasons which explain why she makes such a big effort to humiliate him.

Furthermore, it is fundamental to analyse the references that Lula makes to Averell Harriman and Baudelaire. The first characteristic of both that I must call attention to is the fact that they were white men. In addition to that, they were very well-learned and educated men, both belonging the well-off part of the society. As it is possible to see by the description of Clay in this passage, his figure is actually not very far from the ones of Harriman and Baudelaire. This association with both, although made in a rather ironical way, is one more element that disturbs Lula very much and makes her anger and rage towards Clay even more intense. The final reference to “a black Baudelaire” is also very meaningful, since it creates a representative and kind of paradoxical image that really summarizes the main idea of the conflict engendered throughout the passage.



Actually, the metaphor of the “black Baudelaire” and the comparison with Averell Harriman are also powerful representations of Clay’s fragmentation. As Bhabha affirms, “... we find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion” (1994, p. 2). Going deeper into Bhabha’s consideration, it is indeed possible to conceive Clay as a subject marked by this complexity of belonging to different places at the same time, but not fitting any of them completely. The approximations with Baudelaire and Averell Harriman give Clay a great deal of erudition, since he is compared to a respectful politician and diplomat as well as to the very famous French poet. This contributes to reinforce the problem concerning his identity, since this way he starts to be placed at an *in-between* space. Clay is definitely not a white man, but on the other hand, he does not really fit the stereotype created for black people. In this sense, he could be characterized as a *hybrid* in that society. Clay even seems to reinforce his confusion concerning his identity when he states that “I’m not telling you again (...) If I’m a middle-class fake white man ... let me be. And let me be in the way I want. (...) Let me be who I feel like being. Uncle Tom. Thomas. Whoever.” (JONES, 1971, p. 34). This passage shows very clear that even Clay himself is not very secure about the real nature of his identity. It is possible to see that he is not really sure if he is a black man or a white middle-class man and he says that in fact he just wants to be himself. Considering this situation, maybe the real point is that Clay does not fit exactly in a specific group, but is in a constant movement of trying to find his place in that society, even if this place is not exactly defined.

It is also interesting to observe the reference to Uncle Tom. Considering the time of slavery in America, it is important to remark that, in that time, “The Tom caricature portrays Black men as faithful, happily submissive servants. The Tom caricature (...) was born in ante-bellum America in the defense of slavery.” (PILGRIM, 2010). The use of this image helps to reinforce the idea which exists within Lula’s mind, that black people are in fact inferior and were born exclusively to serve white people. Along with that, the image of Uncle Tom can be also associated with *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, a novel written by Harriet Stowe in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Although it explores the image of Uncle Tom and the main

character has this very name, the novel shows very clearly the point of view of the author, who manifests herself totally against slavery. As a matter of fact, Stowe's novel ended up achieving paradoxical effects. On one hand, it is indeed considered an emblematic novel in regard of anti-slavery matters, and even inspired, to a certain extent, the abolitionist movement in the United States. At first broadcast as a newspaper publication, it reached a rapid success, as we can see in "At least 50,000 people read *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in its first published form, the 41 weekly installments that appeared (...) in the *National Era*, a Washington, D.C. anti-slavery paper with a national readership." (RAILTON, 2010). On the other hand, the character of Uncle Tom was mistaken by many people, who used to believe it was actually an instrument to reinforce the bad image constructed concerning the African-American people and create a stereotype about them.

Another reference to Clay's fragmented identity can be seen in following excerpt as well, actually another example of a moment when Lula harshly offends him: "(...) Clay! You middle-class black bastard. (...) *Clay, you liver-lipped white man. You would-be Christian. You ain't no nigger, you're just a dirty white man (...)*" (JONES, 1971, p. 31, my emphasis). Again the question of fragmentation is visible in this passage. It is very interesting to see the way Lula looks towards Clay as though he were in fact a white man, judging by his appearance and actions. In her mind, probably it would be totally impossible for a black man to wear good clothes and not to occupy a lower social position. This becomes clear if we consider, for example, the sentences "You middle-class black bastard", "Clay, you liver-lipped white man" and "You ain't no nigger, you're just a dirty white man". These sentences even reinforce the difficulty that Lula has to accept the fact that Clay is indeed a black man, but at the same time he does not fit the stereotype that *she herself* created in *her own* mind. This difficulty to accept this fact is intrinsically connected with the discrimination and oppression that she places towards him. Another example of this prejudicial view of Lula can be found on the next excerpt as well:

LULA May the people accept you as a ghost of the future. And love you, that you might not kill them when you can.

CLAY What?

LULA *You're a murderer, Clay, and you know it.*

[Her voice darkening with significance]

You know goddamn well what I mean. (JONES, 1971, p. 21, my emphasis)

The view of Clay as a murderer is one more element that reinforces the opinion that Lula holds of the African-American people. Following her line of thought, it would not be possible for a black man to achieve a comfortable life and a good position within society in an honest way, but only making use of illicit ways. So, the view of Clay as a murderer totally matches with the stereotype that Lula has over black people and even serves to place them in an even worst and more inferior position. Besides that, if we were to interpret this idea of Clay being a murderer in a metaphorical way, we could look upon him as a murderer of Lula's stereotype in relation to black people, which is actually what happens all over the play. In the following excerpt, we have a relevant example of the manifestation of her prejudice again:

LULA Let me go! You black son of a bitch.  
[she struggles against him]

(...)

LULA *You're afraid of white people.* And your father was. (JONES, 1971, p. 33, my emphasis)

In this passage, it becomes visible that Lula gets a rather aggressive attitude towards Clay, struggling against him, offending him and trying to beat him. It is also possible to observe the gradation of her feelings concerning Clay and the desire that she has to destroy him. It is also interesting to pay attention to the sentence "You're afraid of white people", which corroborates to the idea that Lula has about the submission that black people were supposed to have (according to Lula's point of view) in regard to white people. This way of portraying the troubled relations which exist between blacks and whites, which is made very clear in the passage above, also contributed to enhance Baraka's political career if we take into consideration that

*Dutchman* was a pivotal play not only at a particular juncture in 20th-century American culture but also in Mr. Baraka's increasingly politicized career. (...) The play's sudden emergence on the scene helped expose ambiguities in American race relations that would shortly erupt in angry upheavals in cities nationwide, while establishing Mr. Baraka, to both good and occasionally harmful and intolerant effect, in African-American writing. (McGEE, 2010)

Besides that, *Dutchman* really affirmed itself as play containing a highly politically engaged tone, exploring deeply the harsh experiences lived by the African-American people in that society, and depicting vividly the situation of oppression which they lived. As a matter of fact, this situation of oppression

even reaches some humorous (if it is really possible to call them this way) moments, as the one we have in the following passage:

LULA 'Cause you're an escaped nigger.  
 CLAY Yeah?  
 LULA 'Cause you crawled through the wire and made tricks to my side.  
 CLAY Wire?  
 LULA Don't they have wire around plantations?  
 CLAY You must be Jewish. All you can think about is wire. Plantations didn't have wire... (JONES, 1971, p. 29)

In this excerpt, Lula shows her total ignorance concerning black people's reality and historical background, especially about the ones who used to work in plantations. This situation shows very clearly how the stereotype she has in her mind about the blacks is far from the real events. Clay, in turn, takes advantage to make fun of her confusion, implying that she would be a Jewish and would have a historical background involving concentration camps (as it is possible to imply considering the reference to wire).

In spite of being kind of humorous, I would say that these jokes concerning cultural aspects and backgrounds do not really have an entertaining function. In fact, they serve to reinforce the conflict that exists between the two cultures, and implicitly show a feeling of deep hate and anger. Once Baraka is a writer deeply involved with social, political and ideological matters, the humor that he produces has actually the objective of serving as one more instrument of representation of the conflicts between the black people and the white people and not simply as a device to make fun of this situation. As a matter of fact, Baraka has always defended the idea that black authors should produce "high art [...] that must reflect the experiences of the human being, the emotional predicament of the man, as he exists, in the defined world of his being" (JONES, 1999, p. 167). So, in order to represent these experiences, it is necessary to make use of different means, and one of them is actually humor. However, within this context, humor achieves not a funny connotation, but in fact an ironic one. And this is another important element which corroborates with the social critique that Baraka is doing.

Another example of an excerpt that could also be interpreted in a sort of humorous (and ironic) way is found below:

CLAY You act like you're on television already.  
 LULA That's because I'm an actress.  
 CLAY I thought so.

LULA Well, you're wrong. I'm no actress. *I told you I always lie.* I'm nothing, honey, and don't you ever forget it. (JONES, 1971, p. 19, my emphasis)

In this passage, Lula makes an attempt to fool Clay and she actually gets her objective. This attitude on the part of Lula can also be included within the idea that she is intended to destroy him (emotionally, psychologically, physically and in all the other possible ways). Besides that, it is interesting to pay attention to the sentence "I told you I always lie" (which is actually repeated in some other moments of the play), since it could be understood as kind of irony on the part of Baraka, with the objective of satirizing and criticizing white people.

Finally, it is also important to make clear that the play works in a highly symbolic way. Lula is in fact a representation of White America and its tendency to stereotype Blacks in order to oppress them and place them in an inferior position. In turn, Clay is in fact a representation of Black America, as well as the consequences of the oppression those people suffer. All the situations presented throughout the play present a very metaphoric, but vivid description of the social relations between blacks and whites in that society and show very well the feelings involved in that troublesome and complex situation. Thus, this work by Baraka presents very close relations with the social, political and ideological context of the 60's and deals with it in a quite critical and ironical way.

### **3.3 – Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, and *The End of the Century***

Toni Morrison was born on February 18, 1931, in Lorrain, Ohio, under the name of Chloe Anthony Wofford. She was the second of four children in a working-class family and since she was a young child, she and her family had to face intense discrimination. Morrison's parents, George and Ramah Wofford, always constructed the value of group loyalty, which they believed was essential to surviving the harsh realities of racial tension during that era, such as the one they themselves had experienced.

As an African-American in a town of immigrants, she grew up with the notion that the only place she could turn to for aid and reassurance would be within her own community in Lorain, Ohio. Also during her early childhood, she already demonstrated great interest for reading in general and had contact with folktales about the black tradition told by her father. Actually, she grew up in a lively household which was surrounded by songs, fairy tales, ghost stories, myths, music, storytelling, all of the involving the language and the culture of their African-American heritage. Such an atmosphere contributed to reinforce her like for reading and enhance her educational process as a whole. During her childhood and adolescence, she attended an integrated school where she also had to face racism, but later she graduated with honors from Lorain High School in 1949.

After her graduation, she moved to Washington D.C. to attend Howard University, where she took a Bachelor's Degree in English in 1953. It was during these years that Morrison changed her name from 'Chloe' to 'Toni', (derived from her middle name, Anthony) so that it would be easier for the people to pronounce it. Also at that time, Morrison became a member of the Howard Repertory Theatre and their trips around the country to perform plays gave her the opportunity to observe the African-American experience in the South. Afterwards, Morrison went on to pursue graduate studies at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. In 1955, she received a Master's Degree of Arts.

Just after the occasion of her graduation in the Master's course, Morrison moved to Texas in order to begin her teaching career at Texas Southern University. However, in 1957 she returned to Howard University in order to work as an English instructor. Also at that time, she started writing her own literary works, but still not in a regular basis, so she did not make a lot of success at that moment. There she also met Harold Morrison, a faculty member from that same University, with whom she eventually got married and had two children.

During this period, Morrison decided to join a small writers' group so as to be in contact with people who appreciated literature as much as she did. Over that same period her marriage deteriorated, culminating in her divorce in the year of 1964. After that, Morrison decided to leave Howard University and move one more time. She ended up by getting a job as an associate editor for

Random House in Syracuse, New York. Some time later, in 1967, she was transferred to the headquarters in New York City, where she became senior editor for Random House. At this time, Morrison began to write more often. Actually, she used to write every night, just after her children went to bed. Then she was beginning to discover how pleasant writing was to her.

It was exactly during this time that Morrison developed her first story to present at her literature group. For several years, she tried to publish a novel, but after many rejections, she finally got *The Bluest Eye* published in 1970. From 1971 to 1972, Morrison became an Associate Professor of English at the State University of New York while continuing her job at Random House. During this time, Morrison mentored a group of African-American women writers, such as Toni Cade Bambara and Gayl Jones, and compiled and anthologized the works and histories of African-Americans. She also spent her spare time writing her second novel, *Sula*, published in 1973.

The publication of these first novels opened up new pathways for Morrison and encouraged her to write even more. From 1976 to 1977, she lived in New Haven, Connecticut, where she was a visiting lecturer at Yale University. At that time, she was also writing her third novel, *Song of Solomon*. By 1981, she published her fourth novel, *Tar Baby*.

After working at Random House for almost twenty years, Morrison left her position there in 1983. She was named the Albert Schweitzer Professor of the Humanities at the State University of New York in Albany in 1984. At that moment that she was living in Albany, she started writing her first play, named "Dreaming Emmett". The play's first performance opened on January 4<sup>th</sup>, 1986 at the Marketplace Theater in Albany. Soon after, she began work on her fifth novel, *Beloved*.

From 1988 on, Morrison has held the Robert F. Goheen Professorship of the Humanities at Princeton University and has become the first black woman writer to hold a named chair at an Ivy League University. In addition to that, she was also the Chair of their Creative Writing Program until May 2006. In 1992, she published her sixth novel, *Jazz*. In the following year, 1993, Morrison became the first black woman to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature - an extremely remarkable event. After that, she continued her literary production

and published *Paradise*, in 1999 and *Love* in 2003. In the meanwhile, Morrison broke away from her traditional work as a novelist and published several young children's books together with her son, Slade Morrison. Finally, in the latest years, Morrison has been continuing her career as a writer and University Professor. She wrote one more novel, *A Mercy*, in 2008 and is currently a member of the editorial board of *The Nation* magazine.

It is also important to emphasize the Morrison has frequently demonstrated a strong political involvement as far as racial issues are concerned and has also tried to fight against such situation throughout her personal life and writing career. She not only wrote novels, children books and plays, but also different kinds of literary texts, such as short stories, articles and relevant non-fiction works, such as *Playing in the Dark - Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. She also received several important prizes and nominations, including the Nobel Prize (already mentioned above) and the Pulitzer Prize.

As for *Playing in the Dark - Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, the book was written in 1992. In this book, the author provides the reader with three essays: *Black Matters*, *Romancing the Shadow* and *Disturbing Nurses and the Kindness of Sharks*. These three essays provide valuable theoretical and critical insights into the questions of whiteness and blackness in the literature produced by white American writers. She argues that the existing literary criticism in the United States has provided incomplete and kind of limited readings of its canonical literature. The author also points especially to the politics of the universal, or, in other words, the "whiteness universalized", which situates the matter of whiteness as normative, unbiased, undifferentiated, always already legitimate and, as a consequence, transcendent and timeless. Morrison's approach throughout the whole book examines both diachronic and contemporary practices in literary criticism in the United States and tries to demonstrate how those practices put light on certain aspects of US Literature at the same time that they escape from one of its central aspects – race, or in Morrison's words, an "Africanist Presence". Along with that, the author also raises discussions about fundamental discussions concerning African-Americans, such as racism, the power of language and the role of black people



within US Literature. It is interesting to observe that the points made by the author are still very present in our current reality and continue to be the subject of a great deal of discussions.

All over the book, Morrison extends and exemplifies her discussion of these topics by focusing on the meaning of the presence of the black body and of blackness in some literary texts produced by four major white American writers: Willa Cather's *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940), Edgar Allan Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838), Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* (1885), and Ernest Hemingway's *To Have and Have Not* (1937) and *The Garden of Eden* (1986). Throughout her (re)readings of these narratives, she criticizes what she calls a "metaphysics of color" that she locates in these writers and in the literary canon of the United States, which has traditionally been discussed as "raceless and apolitical". The author also asserts that the attempts made by critics to remove politics and race from intellectual and artistic discussions have cost literature its energy and life and also that such attempts are, in fact, racial and political acts in the moment when they try to extract either or both race and politics from the intellectual discourse present in Literature.

As a matter of fact, Morrison alternates the book with theory (especially concerning race and literature) and literary analysis. Right on the preface, before actually going to the analysis of the works specifically, the author discusses some basic points that prove to be fundamental along the rest of the book, as in the following excerpt:

Neither blackness nor 'people of color' stimulates in me notions of excessive, limitless love, anarchy, or routine dread. I cannot rely on these metaphorical shortcuts because I am a black writer struggling with and through a language that can powerfully evoke and enforce hidden signs of racial superiority, cultural hegemony and dismissive 'othering' of people and language which are by no means marginal or already and completely known and knowable in my work. (1997, p. x)

In this passage, the author deals with the question of some words that should be given as titles or labels to the African-American population. Referring to them as "metaphorical shortcuts", Morrison rejects the use of such words. Actually, the use of a word or maybe a group of words to refer to the African-American people is a rather complex matter. As I have already mentioned in my theoretical departing point, and, as Davis's and Mills's writings indicate, it is a difficult discussion to define who can and who cannot be considered a black

person. Along with that, another issue is to decide which is the more correct term that one can use in order to name the African-American people. I tend to use the term “African-American”, but, in fact, this seems to be a problem that has happened throughout history. As Maria Aparecida Salgueiro states,

Historicamente os negros americanos foram progressivamente chamados de “African”, “colored”, “Negro”, “Black”, “Afro-American”, “African-American”. A discussão em torno da formação de identidade tem sido uma constante entre os americanos de descendência africana desde o início de sua luta por igualdade. Inerente a essa discussão está a questão do nome e a reavaliação dos termos que a cada época empregavam-se para referir-se a esse grupo étnico. Os termos *negro* e *black* eram usados pelo proprietário de escravos e, portanto, ofensivos e de conotação pejorativa. Por isso, quando libertados, eles escolheram o eufemismo *colored* como termo mais apropriado. Durante a luta pelos Direitos Civis, no entanto, *black* perdeu o sentido depreciativo e, ao lado da palavra *power*, tornou-se símbolo de poder e revolução (*the Black Power*). Concomitantemente, ativistas dos Direitos Civis já adotavam a expressão *African-American* ou *Afro-American* para ressaltar o orgulho em relação à antiga pátria, mas é recentemente que este termo vem se difundindo com o intuito preciso de restabelecer uma integridade cultural... (2004, p. 52-53)<sup>8</sup>

In this excerpt, the complexity which involves the denomination that is to be given to the African-American descendants becomes evident. By enumerating the different terms employed to designate that people, Salgueiro shows how this question is intrinsically connected with the historical aspects which surround the experiences lived by the African-American people in the United States. This discussion even continues in another moment of the book, when Morrison makes a comment about an article written in 1936 by an American scholar (she does not mention the name of this scholar), who refers to the black people by means of the adjective “darky”:

Although I know this sentence represents the polite parlance of the day, that “darky” was understood to be a term more acceptable than “nigger”, the grimace I made upon reading it was followed by an alarmed distrust of the scholar’s abilities. If it seems unfair to reach back to the thirties for samples of the kind of lapse that can occur when certain manners of polite repression are waived, let me assure you equally egregious representations of the phenomenon are still common. (1997, p. 10-11)

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8 Historically, the black Americans have been called “African”, “colored”, “Negro”, “Black”, “Afro-American”, “African-American”. The discussion about the formation of identity has been constant among African descendant Americans since the beginning of their fight for equality. Also related to this discussion is the reevaluation of the terms that are used at each period to refer to this ethnic group. The terms *negro* and *black* were used by the slave owners and so, were considered offensive and carrying a pejorative connotation. So, when they were set free, they chose the euphemistic term *colored* as being the most appropriate. However, during the fight for the Civil Rights, black lost its depreciative meaning and, side by side with the word *power*, became the symbol of power and revolution (*the Black Power*). Meanwhile, Civil Rights activists adopted the expression *African-American* or *Afro-American* to highlight their pride towards their place of origin, but it is only recently that this term has been spreading with the very precise aim of reestablishing cultural integrity...

By making this comment, she narrates her own experience towards a different term and shares her impressions with the reader. Morrison shows that she felt rather disturbed with the use of the term “darky”. Indeed, assigning and even inventing different denominations for black people may become something very personal and full of prejudice.

In addition to that, in another moment of her book, Morrison reinforces the power that language has whenever the matter of race is concerned. Indeed, if we are to conceive language as an instrument of representation, it actually plays a fundamental role when it comes to the presentation and discussion of racial problems. The question of the power of language and the consequences that it may have also appears in a very clear and strong way in the following passage, which was again taken from the preface:

What happens to the writerly imagination of a black author who is at some level *a/ways* conscious of representing one’s own race to, or in spite of, a race of readers that understands itself to be “universal” or race-free? In other words, how is “literary whiteness” and “literary blackness” made, and what is the consequence of that construction? How do embedded assumptions of racial (not racist) language work in the literary enterprise that hopes and sometimes claims to be “humanistic”? When, in a race-conscious culture, is that lofty goal actually approximated? When not and why? (MORRISON, 1997, p. xii-xiii)

In this excerpt, Morrison raises questions that should be reflected upon very carefully. Actually, she makes a very important association between the issue of language and the one of racial representations, as well as puts light on the political and ideological questions involved within this discussion. Even more important than that, though, is the questioning about the effect of this situation on black authors, and, more generally, in literature as a whole. The questions of “literary whiteness” and “literary blackness” are indeed extremely complex. Such questions would lead to other questions that would wonder about until what extent a text could be classified as white or black and what would be the criteria involved in such a classification. In turn, they would also lead to another reflection involving also the authorship of the texts. For a text to be considered “literary black”, one may wonder whether it is really necessary for it to have been written by a black author, or at least an author who is *considered* black. And this again would go back the questions that I raised in Part 1. As a matter of fact, I certainly do not have the intention of answering these questions,

but I strongly believe that it is quite important to present a discussion about them.

Discussing literature itself more specifically, Morrison assumes a more critical tone as far as some aspects of American literature are concerned, as it is possible to see in the following passage:

There seems to be a more or less tacit agreement among literary scholars that, because American literature has been clearly the preserve of white male views, genius and power, those views, genius and power are without relation to and removed from the overwhelming presence of black people in the United States (...) The contemplation of this black presence is central to any understanding of our national literature and should not be permitted to hover at the margins of the literary imagination. (MORRISON, 1997, p. 5)

In this excerpt, the author leaves it very clear that there is indeed a rather prejudicial and oppressing white supremacy within US literature and strongly criticizes this situation. More specifically, Morrison shows herself discontent towards the reality lived by the black people and the black authors in the context of US literature, once they most of the times occupy a marginal space in it. It is interesting to observe the idea that Morrison conveys about a so-called “tacit agreement” created so as to ignore or maybe justify the oppression of the white scholars towards the blacks. Assuming that this is agreement would really exist, then it would become easier to understand why blacks are so marginalized in Literature, for example. On the other hand, although the author recognizes the existence of such an agreement, she makes a counterpoint to it and re-affirms the importance of the black presence within US literature. This idea is intrinsically connected with the one she defends in the following excerpt as well:

Earlier I said that cultural identities are formed and informed by a nation's literature, and that what seemed to be on the “mind” of the literature of the United States was the self-conscious but highly problematic construction of the American as a new white man. (1997, p. 39)

The topic she raises in this passage is indeed relevant, since it goes deep into the point of the creation of a stereotype in which the image engendered concerning the American white man would be rather idealized and considered superior in relation to black people. In turn, as this image of the American white man is transposed to Literature, it generates the effect that the representation of the white man within Literature also becomes superior to the representation of the black man. As a matter of fact, what is behind this situation is one more time the oppression experienced by the black people and,

within this context, Literature is no other than a type of manifestation in which it is possible to visualize such oppression. The fact that black people are generally placed in secondary position in literary texts is actually a metaphorical way to represent that they occupy a secondary position within society as a whole. Continuing on this issue, Morrison remarks that

Like thousands of avid nonacademic readers, some powerful literary critics in the United States have never read, and are proud to say so, *any* African-American text. It seems to have done them no harm, presented them with no discernible limitations in the scope of their work or influence. I suspect, with much evidence to support the suspicion, that they will continue to flourish without any knowledge whatsoever of African-American literature. (...) It is interesting, not surprising, that the arbiters of critical power in American literature seem to take pleasure in, indeed relish, their ignorance of African-American texts. (1997, p. 13)

At this moment of her argumentation, Morrison puts great emphasis in the question of the prejudice which exists on the part of some critics towards African-American literature. When the author decides to raise this discussion, she is actually involving other elements into her argumentation, especially the question of ideology. If we consider a social context just like the one that exists within American society and also a literary context as the one described by Morrison, it becomes easier to understand the influence of the ideological aspect within the context of Literature. For example, when Morrison analyses Poe's book, she makes the following considerations:

These images of impenetrable whiteness need contextualizing to explain their extraordinary power, pattern, and consistency. Because they appear almost always in conjunction with representations of black or Africanist people who are dead, impotent, or under complete control, these images of blinding whiteness seem to function as both antidote for and mediation on the shadow that is companion to this whiteness – a dark and abiding presence that moves the hearts and texts of American literature with fear and longing. This haunting, a darkness from which our early literature seemed unable to extricate itself, suggests the complex and contradictory situation in which American writers found themselves during the formative years of the nation's literature. (1997, p. 33)

In this excerpt, the author gets even more specific concerning the question of the ideological representation of blackness and whiteness in literature. In order to do that, she analyzes the relation which exists between this representation and the images that are depicted in Poe's work. Morrison points out that the construction of these images has in fact an ideological relation with the views concerning whiteness and blackness and the roles that white and black people play in literature. As a matter of fact, the question of the construction of whiteness and blackness in literature is a rather troubled one,

especially if we take into consideration that, as I discussed before, the definitions of “literary whiteness” and “literary blackness” are very difficult to be established. Anyway, this construction is intrinsically connected to the ideology present in American society and involves a number of different elements, such as what that society believes to be valuable or not and what the social relations which exist within that social group are. Since the US society is deeply marked by a great deal of oppression and discrimination inflicted towards black people, the construction of a so-called “literary blackness” that would place black people in a position of disadvantage in relation to white people can be considered, until a certain extent, a natural, and even expected consequence. Morrison seems to show herself aware of this situation when she makes a relation between this question and the representation of the black people through Literature. At that part of the book, the author wonders

How does literary utterance arrange itself when it tries to imagine an Africanist other? What are the signs, the codes, the literary strategies designed to accommodate this encounter? What does the inclusion of Africans or African-Americans do to and for the work? As a reader my assumption had always been that nothing “happens”: Africans and their descendants were not, in any sense that matters, *there*; and when they were there, they were decorative – displays of their agile writer's technical expertise. I assumed that since the author was not black, the appearance of Africanist characters or narrative or idiom in a work could never be *about* anything other than the “normal”, unracialized, illusory white word that provided the fictional backdrop. (1997, p. 16)

As a matter of fact, the question of the way in which black people are represented in Literature is actually a rather troubled one. As I affirmed above, it is intrinsically connected with the matter of oppression that exists within American society. And in addition to that, it would be also interesting to make reference to Bhabha, more specifically when he states that

However, the narrative and psychological force that nationness brings to bear on cultural production and political projection is the effect of the ambivalence of the 'nation' as a narrative strategy. As an apparatus of symbolic power, it produces a continual slippage of categories, like sexuality, class affiliation, territorial paranoia, or 'cultural difference' in the act of writing the nation. (1994, p. 201)

It is interesting to observe Bhabha's argument concerning the question of the ideology which is involved concerning the writing of a nation and the matter of power which is related to it. Applying this idea to the context of American society, it is possible to perceive that this corroborates exactly with the ideas that Morrison defends in her book. Indeed, US society is indeed very powerful

in what it comes to building a nation where black people are relegated for a lower position. Furthermore, it is important to refer to the following passage, in which Morrison makes another quite relevant point:

*Race has become metaphorical* – a way of referring to and disguising forces, events, classes, and expressions of social decay and economic division far more threatening to the body politic than biological “race” ever was. Expensively kept, economically unsound, a spurious and useless political asset in election campaigns, *racism is as healthy today as it was during the Enlightenment*. It seems it has a utility far beyond economy, beyond the sequestering of classes from one another, and has assumed a metaphorical life so completely embedded in daily discourse that it is perhaps more necessary and more on display than ever before. (1997, p. 63, my emphasis)

In this excerpt, Morrison deviates a little from her central discussion and analysis about literature to present some fundamental theoretical considerations about race and racism. She emphasizes how the question of racism is still so present and close to us in our present society and how it is so intrinsically connected (and, why not, disguised) in our daily reality. It is a good idea to pay attention to the part when she states that “Race has become metaphorical”, indicating how the matter of race is actually a rather controversial one. The reason for that is, as Morrison affirms in this same passage, the concept of race is not merely a biological one, but it is also a socially constructed concept. The passage leaves very clear that there is conflict when we come to the question of what aspects are involved within the discussion of race. As the author claims, and as science has been proving recently, the social aspect of race is probably the one which is most discussed nowadays. Following this discussion, it becomes rather difficult to define what would be the criteria employed to classify a person in a determined racial group – would physiological and genetic characteristics be enough to do such a classification? According to Lopez's view (1994), they would not, and actually I have the same opinion. One more time, I do not have the intention to go deeper into this topic, since this could even be the theme for another dissertation, however, I believe it is important to raise such a fundamental discussion, as a clarifying interdisciplinary discussion in Literary / Cultural Studies.

Also within this passage, it is important to highlight the moment in which Morrison mentions that “racism is as healthy today as it was during the Enlightenment”. When the author states that, she is actually raising a discussion about another very controversial topic. It is interesting to observe that when she

uses the word “healthy” in this passage, it can be interpreted as “fitting”, “adequate” or maybe “useful” for society. If we consider the context of Enlightenment, it is indeed possible to affirm that racism was very useful at that time, just the same way that it continues to be in the present US society, as we can see in

Nowadays, except for members of white supremacist organizations, few whites in the United States claim to be “racist.” Most whites assert they “don’t see any color, just people”; that although the ugly face of discrimination is still with us, it is not longer the central factor in determining minorities’ life chances; and, finally; that like Dr. Martin. *Luther King, Jr.*, they aspire to live in a society where “people are judged by the content of their character, not by the color of their skin” (BONILLA-SILVA, 2003, p. 91)

This excerpt shows in a clear way how complex and harmful the question of racism is. Probably the most serious problem within this matter is that nowadays racism assumed such different characteristics that people may be racist inside their personalities, but they tend not to express it outside (at least in an evident public manner). So, racism has gained a different expression nowadays – if, in the past, it was made very visible in people’s attitudes and was, to a certain extent, accepted (and in some cases, even encouraged), now it is not accepted (at least not officially) and, in general, people try to hide it. However, it does not mean that it does not exist. Unfortunately, the present US society is still very racist and the African-American descendants who live in the United States continue having difficulties to affirm themselves as a worthy, contributing and important people within that society. Thus, this discussion about race and racism serves to reinforce the points Morrison made a reference to all over her book and also provides great opportunity for reflection.

This way, we see that the issues raised by Toni Morrison are absolutely important and extremely relevant in relation to the contemporary world. The analyses she provided show very clearly how complex the question of blackness and whiteness is and how necessary it is that this question be discussed, principally within the academic scenario. The points and relations that she engenders concerning theory, literature, politics and ideology are certainly very relevant as far as the African-American studies and concerned. Actually, we can say that “she [Morrison] treats literature (...) as a valuable reflection of culture and social constructions that may not be talked about openly or directly” (ALLBERY, 2009).



Thus, in *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison presents and develops the most important questions and issues of contemporary times in relation to race and blackness in a very strong and effective manner. Obviously, there are no closed questions; on the contrary, they are wide open to further discussion, and Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* provides an excellent material for us to understand, reflect and actually be able to discuss such important issues.

## CONCLUSION

Thus, considering all the previous analysis, it is possible to state that each of the three works relates with its respective background in a different way. Through the use of different literary genres and artistic devices, these three pieces of writing provide distinct views of each one of the backgrounds and work with this relation in different manners.

*Cane* presents The Harlem Renaissance in a quite poetic way. By means of a wide variety of literary and artistic devices, Toomer managed to represent the most important issues and feelings concerning the situation of the black people during that period in a way that made it poetic, romantic and metaphorical, but at the same time strong and effective.

*Dutchman* deals with The Civil Rights Era in a harsh critical and ironical tone. The way in which Baraka presents and develops the social relations between blacks and whites in that society shows in a clear and vivid manner the most important characteristics and feelings involved in such a complex relation and provides a meaningful and powerful representation of that complicated situation.

*Playing in the Dark* represents an absolutely fundamental theoretical reflection of several questions related to blackness in contemporary times. Judging by all the content and the topics developed by Morrison, this book is certainly a key work which helps us to understand and reflect about a great number of issues involving the complex relations between whiteness and blackness, not only broadly speaking but also as far as literary studies are concerned.

Broadly speaking, I know that my work has limitations in terms of texts and historical criticism, but I believe that the overall work is a good sampling that manages to capture the momentum of African-American history in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and its mimetic reflection in literature. Since I wrote from Brazil, I did not have the opportunity to have access to all the publications that would be desirable for this kind of dissertation. However, I think I was able to reach the objectives which I was looking for.

To finish up, I hope I have been up to the expectations concerning this dissertation. I really wish it would not become just one more dissertation at a University library, but rather, I would like that other people could read it. And that is not only because *I* wrote it, but because I want people to be aware that African-American Literature *exists* and has been gradually growing up; that there are many authors that were simply 'forgotten' (or cast aside) by the academic world; that these authors are worth reading; that the writings produced by such authors can actually become topics of a dissertation and that people should look upon them just like they look upon any other piece of writing by any other author. After all, I want people to be more critical and have less prejudice.

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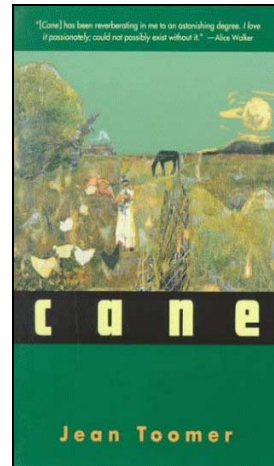
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Jean Toomer

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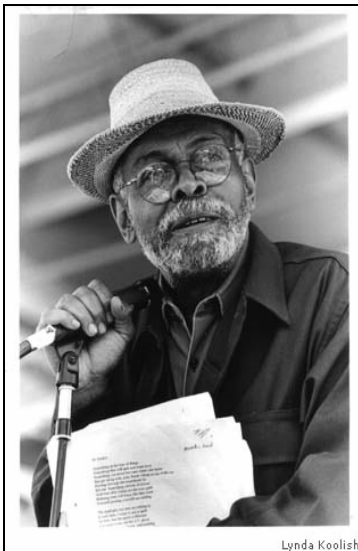
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*Cane* (cover)

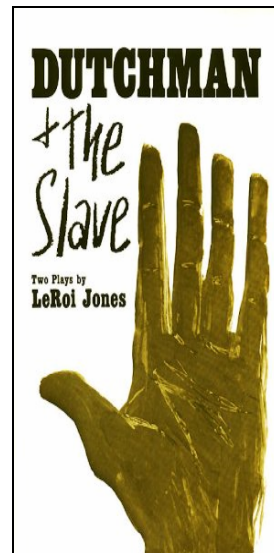
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Amiri Baraka

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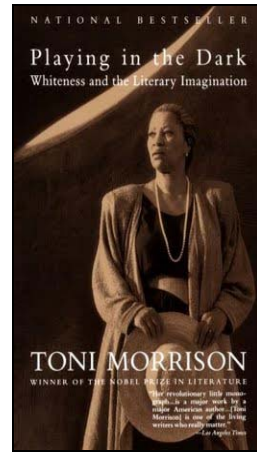
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Toni Morrison

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*Playing in the Dark* (cover)

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