



# The Blue Man as a Racial Amalgamation of the American: Jeans Toomer's Perception of Racism and National Identity in "Blue Meridian"

**Rana Jaber Obaid**, Asst. Lecturer, The General Directorate of Education at Al- Qadisiyah Province, Email: [Rana.jabir11@yahoo.com](mailto:Rana.jabir11@yahoo.com)

Identity crisis has remained the main concern for African-American poets in all the poetic genres. It conveys the physical and mental bondage associated with their political, social, and economic environment. African American poetry focuses on the way such an environment comes to impede their spiritual as well as physical freedom. African-American poets seek an identity that gives meaning to their existence. This research examines identity and sheds light on African-American poetry. "The Blue Meridian" is a perfect demarcation of the African-Americans hurtful experience with the oppression that aroused their identity crisis. The blacks have been dominated and marginalized by the white culture. Many African American poets, like Jeans Toomer, deals with the issue of identity; either to submit for the prevailing culture or to hold their color and their past as the descendants of the earlier slaves. In his writing, Toomer has involved in the theme of identity that came to the surface due to racial discrimination and racism. In "Blue Meridian," Toomer depicts the social realities of the blacks encountered within a world dominated by white values and ideologies in which they are marginalized.

**Keywords:** *Jeans Toomer, "The Blue Meridian," African American, and identity.*



## Introduction

African American poetry is an exceptional kind of poetry that leaped from the distress of the blacks and the enslavement of the whites. It is a chief hallmark of the American literary tradition for its artistic value and influence on world culture. However, this extraordinary body of poetry remained under-sightseeing as a topic of research, consideration, appreciation, and study. African-American poets write to encounter the common arguments that the blacks are powerless to produce and to claim their human rights to be treated as it is indicated in the Declaration of Independence. They believe “that all men are created equal”. In their poems, African-American poets have involved the theme of identity crisis that arose due to their racism (Asma, 2017). Their racism and alienation comes from the level to which the blue posting of the African American serves to estrange them from the ideals of the prevailing culture. That position is the consequence of centuries of segregation, slavery, and other refutations of human rights to the black American world (Dugan, 2015).

The painful and tragic experience of the African-Americans lead them to fight for and to establish an identity of their own. The tragedy is that the Afro-Americans’ quest for identity ascend from their ancestors, black color, and race, the things for which he himself is not guilty. The Afro-American poetry has been approached through the struggle for freedom from all discriminations. It has emphasized on the way such settings delay their spiritual fulfillment as well as physical freedom (Das, 2012).

The Africans who have been taken to the United States as slaves bring with them their inherent possessions, values, and customs, which constitute an atypical black identity. These idiosyncrasies become the principal concern of the African American writers in their quest for identity within larger American society. Due to the oppression and alienation, the blacks go through, a black person finds it difficult to identify his identity within white societies. Being a black causes the feeling of being hated and despised for the mere reason of skin color. Actually, slavery is reflected as a hallmark of American belief and tradition. The slaves has to undertake distresses at the psychological and physical levels. The fact that Africans are sold as belongings have devoted the African American poets to apprehend the theme of identity through a lot of their writings (Binabdallah, 2016). They have a strong sense of African identity, which is labeled as “national” Their identity comes to be apparent in festivals, communal activities, and religious issues (Bruce Jr., 1995).



A study of African-American culture and its literary manifestation of identity can be explained through the element of race. As well as, African-American poetry has been dominated by the struggle for freedom from all types of discriminations to establish one's identity (Das, 2012). It denotes the behavioral characteristics, values, and attitudes that delineate an individual within a larger society. For African Americans, the issue of identity is significant due to the oppression and exclusion they have undergone. Accordingly, the theme of identity is highly persistent in their literary works. The black find it difficult to identify their identity within the society, due to the oppression and the alienation they go through (Benabdallah, 2016).

As a notion, identity can be defined “as the search for self and its relationship to social contexts and realities”. The African-Americans have fought to establish a sense of identity, and to assert a political and cultural voice in a white society. They can't call themselves Africans nor Americans. They are not only lost their culture but their very individual designation. Negro is either given a Christian name or the surname of his master to be simply recognized that he belongs to a certain master. In this process, he loses his personal sense of identity (Das, 2012). This conveyance summaries and refuges a self-sufficient sense of black identity.

During the early twentieth century, Modernists complete their nineteenth-century predecessors' quest concerning the identity and investigate the many cultures in America. Unlike these Modernists, Jean Toomer demonstrates a strong prerogative to Whitman's philosophy and sides with other Modernists American writers. Jean Toomer (1894-1967) is an American poet and novelist and a prominent figure of the Harlem Renaissance. He struggles throughout his entire life to certify a more elaborated understanding of race in America. Despite the fact that Toomer claims Negro, French, Dutch, German, Welsh, Jewish, and Native American blood, he is labeled as a black author. This overgeneralized label irritates Toomer's efforts to expose and rejoice racism in his work. This upheaval against the label has cost Toomer some acceptance among famous literary contemporaries. Toomer feels that his mission in America is to proliferate the atmosphere of racism, and to battle this physical and spiritual constraint to create what he calls “the enlightened American race” (Fallon, 2009).

Emphasizing how the detection of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* helps him to appeal the disseminated pieces of his life, Jean Toomer moves to view himself as a “cultural aristocrat,” not a “cultural nationalist,” he argues:



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I was lifted into and shown my real world. It was the world of the aristocrat-but not the social aristocrat; the aristocrat of culture, of spirit and character, of ideas, of true nobility. And for the first time in years and years I breathed the air of my land. I resolved to devote myself to the making of myself such a person as I caught glimpses of in the pages of Wilhelm Meister. For my specialized work, I would write (Toomer, 1945).

Regionally, Toomer's racial position can be labeled as an "enigma". Toomer confirms that African Americans have strong cultural root. He becomes absorbed in the situation of African Americans and takes a job at a school in Georgia, which stimulates him to write poems and stories about African Americans that come into *Cane* (Napierkowski, 1998). He becomes deeply involved in making an amalgamation of new forms and themes. He is attracted to the American writers who use regional materials in a poetic manner, especially Walt Whitman, Robert Frost, and Sherwood Anderson. Correspondingly, he is captivated by the Imagists, especially their emphasis on renewed vision and an immaculate economical line. He writes, "it was just what I had been looking for. I began feeling that I had in my hands the tools for my creation" (Bell, 1980).

"Blue Meridian" constructs a visualization of America free of the violation and motivated by biased social detachments in class, race, color, and sex. It first appeared in *Pagany*, in 1932, during Toomer's marriage to the writer, Marjorie Latimer. The publication of "The Blue Meridian" marks the end of fifteen years of obsession with the "new world soul myth" whose themes invade and captivate young Toomer's imagination (Hicks, 1985). "Blue Meridian" represents the most comprehensive portrayal of Toomer's visions for "a universal race." The poem aims to authenticate a future America gravid with a complete, racial endorsement of all humankind. The speaker of the poem affirms the challenge of free people, and to seek a "Divine Being" in an entirely spiritualized nation (Fallon, 2009).

Jean Toomer's "Blue Meridian" is a polemical poem of perceptive allegations, written to emphasize that in America there is the opportunity for a new world image wherein all fences have to be overwhelmed. The poem maintains the dimensions of conformist Western society that ignore and delineate others. It shows the promises inherent in the American people for incapacitating these obstacles and becoming one with the "Universal Self," the spirit behind all existence (Tyrone, 2009). "Blue Meridian" characterizes the use and application of Gurdjieff's philosophies to the definite contexts of American life. In this poem, Toomer rearranges the "earlier race man" into a more comprehensive, salvific figure and negotiator of America's calamities and desires. This figure is the blue meridian, which is a metaphor for his racial ideology (Nuzum, 2003).



Toomer rejects all colors even white and elects one of the colors that still represents America, blue. The blue man personifies America's multifarious races. Toomer uses the blue man as a "racial amalgamation" of the American. The blue man is the "mulatto." Thus, the "blue man" embodies Toomer's insight of the "apotheosis" of the Modern individual and America's heterogeneity (McClellan, 1992). Toomer proves that "the parts of man-his mind, emotions, and body are radically out of harmony with each other" (Bell, 1980).

Although the categorization of Toomer as an African American paradoxically empowers his voice. His persona, as the disclaimer of this race, makes the placement of his literature into white or black traditions challenging. Toomer's aspiration to be outside the African-American identity impede his admission into the anthologies of literature that are not labeled by race. Rejecting ethnic lines does not empower his voice; moderately, Toomer finds that by stepping over those lines he alienates himself from the groups he required to join. His "realized kinship" does not become "away for him to enter," but rather became his source of alienation and hostility (McClellan, 1992).

"Blue Meridian" is the poetic pinnacle of Toomer's quest for identity. It signifies the firmness of unbearable emotional alienation and intellectual chaos over the problems of race as viewed through the prism of his own personal crisis. The main symbol of "Blue Meridian" is implied in its title. The meridian, which designates the uppermost point of affluence, magnificence, and power, denotes the "Spirit of mankind". It also signifies the imagined circles which link both geophysical poles and the celestial poles. The title of the poem produces a series of symbols which strengthen the themes of entirety, growth, and cosmic consciousness. The color evolution of the meridian from black to white to blue resembles the association of the poem through different stages of man's historical and organic advance to a higher form (Tyrone, 2009). In "Blue Meridian," Toomer moves beyond race to become the prophet of a new direction of man to be identified as the American. Toomer's poetic determination of his reserved and communal quest for identity characterizes a genuine struggle to cast off all organizations that dominate human beings and prevent the free performance of intellect and benevolence in the world (Bell, 1980).

Toomer describes the American as the hopeless victim of circumstance. Any man is limited by certain appeals to mold his own identity. Toomer once argued: "I am of no particular race, I am of the human race, a man at large in the human world, preparing for a new race." Toomer lives in a society that does not permit him the dignity of being of the human race only. He is categorized, fights the categorization, and loses himself in an identity that is not his whole being (Waldron, 1971).



The poem consists of more than eight hundred lines. Actually, the most important aspects of these lines are their movement from the black, to the white, to the blue meridian, demonstrating a modification in awareness from the conformist categories of black and white to the sign of the unity of all people and ideals, or meridian. Critic Jean Wagner states that the “blue meridian” as the “synthesis of the Black and White Meridians.” Essentially, Toomer presents the theme of America’s potentiality. He envisions that America is capable of oneness with the godhead if all Americans willingly commit themselves to be “spiritualized.” “Black meridian,” is the symbol of racial difference and oppression and of a thrilling worldview that America should learn to overwhelmed in order to achieve the vital goal of oneness, which is symbolized in the poem as the “blue meridian.” He impulses readers to pursue their spirituality and to terminate all barricades splitting human beings from each other (Tyrone, 2009).

The “Lemur” refers to a wicked spirit of the dead in ancient Roman houses. A “blanched Lemur” refers to the powerless spirit, faded ghost, and the “moulting Thunderbird.” It indicates the death of Native American ethnicities after the overview of the new “American” race (Fallon, 2009). Toomer uses “I” to epitomize the Universal Self, who is unified with God. “Spherical images” flourish to represent the harmony of all being. If Toomer’s ideal race of Americans is enthusiastic to “Let the Big Light in,” the union of themselves with God and the spirit would be possible. Rooted in Eastern religion and philosophy, these ideas are derived from both Gurdjieff and Whitman. Their emphasis on suspended and equal relations with other equality that make them so doubtful States. Their authoritarianism proclaimed their equality with European civilization and Christian piety (Bruce Jr, 2019).

Toomer rejects the canon which categorized anyone with any African ancestry as “Negro.” He felt that his tiny part of African inheritance can’t govern his racial identity. He stated that his genealogy made him an American, neither white nor black (Whalan, 2009). The false barriers of conventional society have nothing more than enslavement and imprisonment. Moreover, these barriers, whether they be of, nation, race, region, sex, class, or creed, bring a gradual deterioration of human spirit and potential. Deterioration prevents connection with and consciousness of the spiritual dimensions of life. Jean Wagner, one of the best critics of Toomer’s poem, states that the fundamental thesis of “Blue Meridian” signifies the necessity for a regenerated America, to be achieved through the regeneration of each individual and each community composing it (Tyrone, 2009)

In “Blue Meridian,” Toomer sings exultantly a new world order, neither Black nor white, Eastern nor Western. The new order of man is “The blue man, the purple man,” whose



race called the Americans, and the new society is America, “spiritualized by each new American.” Through such advancement, the regenerated American is the pleasantly developed, universal man, free of definitions and classifications that restrict or confine the vitality of his being. For Toomer, America is, in Whitman’s exuberant words, “the greatest poem,” “a teeming nation of nations,” and “the race of races” (Bell, 1980).

### **Conclusion**

Toomer develops his notion of the racism, “blue” race, as a new classification authorized by his poetry. Toomer tries to gain recognition and value for the African part of the American soul. African component is just one part of the factual and complete self of the nation. Toomer attempts to create a “national” identity, an Afro-American identity, composed of two inseparable parts, the African and the American. In order to highlight this concept, he needs to rescue the African soul of his nation. “Blue Meridian” is a protest poem that encounters racial social injustice, discrimination, and marginalization. The racial conflict in American society is the conflict of culture. Some cultures are addressed as prominent while others are considered to be inferior. The race is a cultural tool abused by the whites to segregate the Afro-Americans. All this is visible in Toomer’s poetry.



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