November Cotton Flower

POEM TEXT

Boll-weevil's coming, and the winter's cold,
Made cotton-stalks look rusty, seasons old,
And cotton, scarce as any southern snow,
Was vanishing; the branch, so pinched and slow,
Failed in its function as the autumn rake;
Drouth fighting soil had caused the soil to take
All water from the streams; dead birds were found
In wells a hundred feet below the ground—
Such was the season when the flower bloomed.
Old folks were startled, and it soon assumed
Significance. Superstition saw
Something it had never seen before:
Brown eyes that loved without a trace of fear,
Beauty so sudden for that time of year.

SUMMARY

When cotton-eating beetles and the winter's chill arrived, the cotton stalks looked tarnished and time itself seemed tired. The cotton, as rare as snow in Georgia, was disappearing. The stream was so shrunken and sluggish that it couldn't move the autumn leaves aside. A terrible drought had made the soil dry up the streams. Thirsty birds died in wells dug deep into the earth. This was what was happening when the cotton flower suddenly appeared. The elders were amazed, and witnesses soon attached significance to the flower. Superstitious people saw something new and unexpected in it: brown, loving eyes that showed no fear, and the surprising, untimely arrival of something beautiful.

THEMES

ADVERSITY AND HOPE

"November Cotton Flower" is a sonnet about hope blooming, like certain flowers, in the harshest of environments. Set against the historical backdrop of American slavery and racial segregation, the poem tells readers how the cotton flower of the title miraculously "bloomed" amid devastating natural conditions (including insect infestation and drought). Through this image, the poem emphasizes both the importance of hope and the difficulty of finding and maintaining hope under awful circumstances. This flower represents an especially fragile and complicated hope, because it isn't *just* beautiful; as a crop once picked by enslaved people, it's also a symbol of slavery itself. On the one hand, then, it suggests that new life and "beaut[iful]" possibilities can grow in adversity; on the other, it's a reminder of terrible oppression. Any optimism it inspires (such as hope for social progress) is complicated by the horrors of what's come before—and what might happen in the future.

The poem's description of terrible weather in the southern U.S. recalls the history of American slavery and racism, which is inseparable from the region's cotton industry. An infestation of boll-weevils (cotton-loving beetles) and "the winter's cold" have devastated the cotton plantations, making cotton itself as rare "as any southern snow." A drought has also dried up the land, damaging life in various forms. Birds, so often symbols of hope and freedom, struggle to stay alive; they've been getting stuck and dying in wells below the ground. Since the cotton flower and southern setting are linked with the history of American slavery, the suffering in the natural world metaphorically evokes the human suffering of Black Americans.

As if in a miracle, the cotton flower somehow blooms under these seemingly hopeless conditions, bringing a fragile sense of beauty and hope. "Old folks," who have seen many seasons, are amazed that the flower could suddenly flourish in this environment. To the "Superstitio[us]," the flower takes on "Significance," seeming to represent the triumph of beauty, love, and growth over hatred and destruction. This "Beauty" seems "sudden," as if it has come out of nowhere, and conjures up a vision of "Brown eyes that loved without a trace of fear." The mention of color gestures towards the poem's background of slavery and segregation (based, of course, on skin color). But the "brown eyes" could also refer to the flowers themselves, perhaps symbolizing all the people who suffered enslavement and racism—and a future of love and fearlessness for themselves and their descendants. It's as if the poem glimpses a future of racial justice, without pretending that this is anything more than a hopeful vision.

Thus, as both a symbol of beauty and possibility *and* a reminder of suffering, the flower can only offer an uncertain hope at best. The poem doesn't simplify or read too much into the flower's sudden arrival. Instead, it interprets this arrival in deliberately ambiguous terms. Indeed, the old folks' "Superstition" might reflect a fear that the flower's blooming is a kind of trick or deception. It's possible, in other words, that this sign *is* hopeful, pointing toward a future of "lov[ing] without a trace of fear." But it's equally possible that the arrival of the cotton flower, which evokes such a terrible history, will only usher in a new season of oppression and disappointment. Its blooming thus announces

not only a new hope but the grim uncertainty surrounding that hope.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

Boll-weevil's coming, and the winter's cold,
Made cotton-stalks look rusty, seasons old,

The first couplet (in fact, the first eight lines, or *octave*) of the sonnet portrays a landscape full of death and misery.

The poem is set in the southern U.S., a region historically linked with the growth and trade of cotton. Cotton was central to the economy of states like Georgia (where much of Toomer's *Cane* is set); it was also a main driver of the transatlantic slave trade, which forced millions of enslaved Africans to work on plantations in brutal conditions. The very mention of cotton in this setting gestures towards this tragic history. Though slavery had been abolished by the 1920s (when the poem was published), racial segregation and tension were a daily reality for Black Americans. Some small cotton farms were Black-owned, but white landowners still kept many Black workers and tenant farmers in dire poverty.

The "Boll-weevil's coming" has meant disaster for the region. This cotton-loving beetle has chomped through the plantations and caused great economic damage. Symbolically, the poem may be linking this predatory pest with the greed and destruction of the cotton industry. Between the beetle's appetite and the "the winter's cold," the crop has basically failed this year. The stalks look "rusty," or reddish and decayed. There's a weariness in the atmosphere (the "seasons" seem "old"), reflecting the time and effort wasted on this year's spoiled cotton crop.

Notice how lines 1-2 use harsh sibilance, alliteration, and other consonance to conjure up an inhospitable environment:

> Boll-weevil's coming, and the winter's cold,
> Made cotton-stalks look rusty, seasons old,

The tough /k/ alliteration and /t/ consonance, together with the hissing or buzzing of the /s/ and /z/ sounds, add up to a series of unpleasant sounds. (Try saying the lines out loud!) Sonically, it's as though a chill wind blows through the poem, evoking the desolation of this wintry scene.

LINES 3-4

And cotton, scarce as any southern snow,
Was vanishing;

The phrase from line 3 through the first caesura in line 4 confirms that the cotton crop is failing, due to the double menace of the boll-weevil beetle and the harsh winter. The loss of the cotton—the region's major crop—suggests an atmosphere of hopelessness that, in turn, evokes the region's history of slavery and racism.

The speaker's simile calls the cotton "scarce as any southern snow." Snow is infrequent in the southern U.S.; when it does fall, it's usually light and quick to melt. Thus, the simile suggests that the cotton is both sparse and fleeting. Symbolically, it may suggest that hope, too, is melting away in the region—whether it's an economic hope or a dream of social progress.

Like line 2, this phrase is heavy on sibilance:

> And cotton, scarce as any southern snow,
> Was vanishing;

These whispering or hissing sounds have an eerie quality that reflects the poem's desolate landscape, with its "vanishing," ghostlike cotton.

Here and throughout the first eight lines, the meter has a noticeably slow pace, partly due to tough, chewy, monosyllabic words like "scarce." (Other examples include "branch" and "pinched" in line 4, "Drouth" in line 6, etc.) This effect helps capture the atmosphere of the scene: the seasons are gradually turning, but the landscape seems sluggish and lifeless.

LINES 4-8

the branch, so pinched and slow,
Failed in its function as the autumn rake;
Drouth fighting soil had caused the soil to take
All water from the streams; dead birds were found
In wells a hundred feet below the ground—

Lines 4-8 continue to describe an environment thrown out of balance. The lack of rain has caused a drought, disturbing nature's equilibrium and affecting people as well as plants and animals. Since the poem is set among the cotton plantations of the southern U.S., a site of centuries of slavery and oppression, this sick, failing landscape may symbolize the failures of a society built on racism. (The poem is part of a book, *Cane*, that explores Black American experiences and American history more broadly.)

The "branch"—meaning not a tree branch but a stream—has received so little rainfall that it's become "pinched and slow." It's deprived of what it needs in order to thrive, which is perhaps a reflection of a larger deprivation and frustration in the region. Alliterative /f/ sounds ("Failed"/"function"/"fighting"), repeated /an/ sounds ("vanishing"/"branch"), and /nch/ consonance ("branch"/"pinched") create heavy emphases that slow this passage down—much as drought has slowed the water.

Because the branch is water-deprived, it can't serve "as the autumn rake," collecting and carrying away leaf mulch and soil. Other bodies of water have dried up, too; the thirsty soil has sucked away "All water from the streams." Because the land is so dry, birds have grown desperate in their search for water; they enter "wells a hundred feet below the ground," get stuck, and die. Presumably, they contaminate humans' water supply in the process. Throughout this passage, failure breeds failure: one element of nature can't fulfill its purpose without the others. Death and decay are effectively contagious.

The poem reinforces the bleakness of its imagery through sound effects. For example, the phrase "dead birds" creates a heavy spondee (a metrical foot consisting of two stressed syllables) in the middle of an iambic line. Birds are normally a symbol of hope and freedom, but here they're just dead weight, evidence of a disastrous situation. The dull, thudding /d/ consonance in "dead birds [...] found [...] hundred [...] ground" reflects the lifelessness of the birds.

The caesuras in this passage (indicated by the semicolon and mid-line comma in line 4 and the semicolon in line 7) also slow the poem's flow, suggesting blockage and frustration. The dash at the end of line 8 marks the end of the sonnet's *octave*, or first eight lines. These increasingly bleak lines have culminated in the image of "dead birds," but the dash hints that something is about to change in the sestet.

LINES 9-11

Such was the season when the flower bloomed.
Old folks were startled, and it soon assumed
Significance.

In line 9, the poem shifts suddenly, marking the "turn" that traditionally begins the sestet of a sonnet:

> Such was the season when the flower bloomed.

"Such" is a summary word, encompassing the previous eight lines. Thanks to the drought and the weevil infestation, the whole harvest "season" seemed like a loss, and the whole environment seemed like a death zone. "Such was" is a trochee (a metrical foot consisting of a stressed followed by an unstressed syllable) rather than an iamb (the opposite), so the phrase varies the poem's rhythmic pattern. "Such" also alliterates with "season." These effects add emphasis to the start of the line, as if the speaker is announcing, "*That's* how the season was."

At this moment, the "November Cotton Flower" finally arrives. Initially, the poem seems to present it as a kind of antidote to all the surrounding misery. It seems to symbolize a change of fortune, a sudden flourishing in the midst of decay. The pleasant consonance of "flower bloomed" suggests the beauty of this new arrival. The event "startle[s]" the "Old folks" in the community, who probably feel like they've seen everything there is to see.

But "startled" is an ambiguous word here. For the old folks, the flower might represent a pleasant surprise, a sign that new life might grow out of past decay. Or it might strike them as a bad omen: a reminder of centuries of slavery and injustice built on the cotton trade. Either way, the flower seems to hold great "Significance." (The caesura and full stop after this word make it especially dramatic—especially significant.)

LINES 11-14

Superstition saw
Something it had never seen before:
Brown eyes that loved without a trace of fear,
Beauty so sudden for that time of year.

After the caesura in line 11, the speaker explains that "Superstition saw / Something it had never seen before." In other words, the blooming of the cotton flower in November seems impossible and miraculous, and it might herald some unprecedented change.

"Superstition" is a personification, standing for all those people—including, probably, the "Old folks" of line 10—who view the world through a superstitious lens. In that sense, the cotton flower seems to be an omen—but of what?

The poem provides a partial answer in its closing couplet:

> Brown eyes that loved without a trace of fear,
> Beauty so sudden for that time of year.

"Brown eyes" could be a metaphor for the cotton flowers themselves, whose brown stems contrast with the cotton's white background like an iris and pupil against the white of the eye. In the highly charged context of southern cotton plantations, the mention of color also invokes the history of American slavery and racism. In this oppressive environment, "Brown eyes"—as in the eyes of Black/brown people—aren't used to looking at someone or something and "lov[ing] without a trace of fear." In other words, fear has historically been the norm for Black Americans. So the people witnessing this flower *might* see it as an image of fledgling hope, a glimpse of a future in which racial harmony is neither controversial nor a dream. The flower's beauty "startle[s]" people because it's "so sudden" and unexpected "for that time of year"—perhaps a metaphor for hope arriving when things seem hopeless.

But it's not clear that this flower is a simple symbol of hope and beauty. It's clearly beautiful, but its sudden appearance is also unsettling, especially because it's tied to a history of oppression. Omens, of course, can be good *or* bad, and the poem leaves this one ambiguous. The use of "fear" as one of the final rhyme words adds to the tense uncertainty of the ending.

These lines also continue the poem's prominent use of sibilance: "Superstition saw / Something [...] seen [...] trace [...]

so sudden." Though the cotton flower has bloomed, these whispering or hissing sounds (which lines 1-8 linked to images of natural decay) might subtly signal that the environment is still eerie and desolate.

The ending is thus a kind of complicated cliffhanger, challenging readers to decide for themselves what the "November Cotton Flower" really means. It offers a possible glimpse of hope while refusing any platitudes about a brighter future.

SYMBOLS

NATURAL DECAY

The first eight lines of the poem—the *octave* of the sonnet—portray a bleak agricultural landscape in the southern U.S. Pests have ruined the cotton crop, it's brutally cold, and the lack of rainfall has caused a major drought. Even birds can't find enough water: they're dying in droves, getting stuck "in wells a hundred feet below the ground" as they try to quench their thirst.

Given the context, this desolation could symbolize the oppressive landscape of American history. The U.S. cotton industry has historically been linked with centuries of slavery and racism, along with other injustices in American society. Like this deeply flawed society, nature is essentially failing, here, in its quest for harmony and balance. It's as though an internal war has gripped the landscape—"Drouth fighting soil"—causing widespread suffering for all kinds of creatures. Similarly, oppressive systems damage all of society, preventing it from thriving to its fullest potential.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-8

THE NOVEMBER COTTON FLOWER

When the cotton flower blooms out of season, surprised observers immediately view it as a symbol. It assumes great "Significance" and "startle[s]" the "Old folks" who see it. In other words, its unexpected arrival seems to mean *something*—even if it's not clear what.

The flower can be interpreted in two seemingly contradictory ways. On the one hand, the cotton plant is so closely linked with the history of slavery that the flower's arrival, though a kind of small miracle, could be seen as a bad omen. Perhaps it signifies a new era of inequality and racism—its late arrival suggesting that humankind's worst attributes have the capacity to flourish in any "season."

On the other hand, the flower is a beautiful sight. "Superstiti[ous]" community members seem to view it as a hopeful sign, perhaps even a vision of future racial harmony: a world in which "Brown eyes [...] lov[e] without a trace of fear."

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-14:** "Such was the season when the flower bloomed. / Old folks were startled, and it soon assumed / Significance. Superstition saw / Something it had never seen before: / Brown eyes that loved without a trace of fear, / Beauty so sudden for that time of year."

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration (including sibilance) occurs frequently throughout "November Cotton Flower." For the most part, it creates a harsh sound that matches the poem's unforgiving, wintry atmosphere. This effect is most prominent in the opening lines:

> Boll-weevil's coming, and the winter's cold,
> Made cotton-stalks look rusty, seasons old,
> And cotton, scarce as any southern snow,
> Was vanishing [...]

Try saying these lines out loud—it's almost like teeth chattering! The repeated /k/ sounds are hard and unpleasant, while the /s/ sounds, in this context, sound whispery and eerie, like a cold wind blowing across the land. Additional /k/ consonance (e.g., "stalks") and internal /s/ sibilance (e.g., "rusty," "scarce") contribute to this evocative soundscape, too.

Sibilance hits new heights around lines 9-12:

> Such was the season when the flower bloomed.
> Old folks were startled, and it soon assumed
> Significance. Superstition saw
> Something it had never seen before:

(Note that "assumed" is alliterative here because that shared /s/ sound lands at the start of a stressed syllable.) This is the moment when the cotton flower appears, supposedly bringing with it a new sense of beauty and hope. In the absence of harsher alliteration (/k/ sounds, etc.), these /s/ sounds have a soothing quality that might reflect the more optimistic mood. But they also subtly echo those bleak opening lines, perhaps suggesting that any hope is tempered by the ongoing drought—along with whatever social conditions (racism, poverty, etc.) the drought may symbolize.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "coming," "cold"

- **Line 2:** “cotton-stalks,” “seasons”
- **Line 3:** “scarce,” “southern snow”
- **Line 4:** “so,” “slow”
- **Line 5:** “Failed,” “function”
- **Line 6:** “to take”
- **Line 9:** “Such,” “season”
- **Line 10:** “startled,” “soon,” “assumed”
- **Line 11:** “Significance. Superstition saw”
- **Line 12:** “Something,” “seen”
- **Line 14:** “so sudden”

CAESURA

The poem uses caesura to control the poem's rhythm and reinforce its meaning.

Take the first eight lines, for example, which conjure up an atmosphere of decay and desolation. Drought has caused the "branch"—an important stream—to dry up, affecting plants and animals alike. In other words, the water isn't *flowing* as it normally would, and natural processes have stalled as a result. In a similar way, caesuras break up the poem's flow in lines 3, 4, and 7:

> And cotton, scarce as any southern snow,
> Was vanishing; the branch, so pinched and slow,
> Failed in its function as the autumn rake;
> Drouth fighting soil had caused the soil to take
> All water from the streams; dead birds were found
> [...]

These sudden pauses interrupt the poem's fairly regular iambic pentameter, adding to the sense that everything in the region is slowing down or dying.

The poem saves its one full-stop caesura (the rest use commas and semicolons) for a choice moment in line 11:

> Old folks were startled, and it soon assumed
> Significance. Superstition saw

The abrupt period adds extra weight to the word "Significance," making it seem, well, more significant! Similarly, the caesura in the previous line (indicated by the comma) mimics the older folks' "startled" reaction to the flower's arrival; it's as if the line itself is thrown off for a moment.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “coming, and”
- **Line 2:** “rusty, seasons”
- **Line 3:** “cotton, scarce”
- **Line 4:** “vanishing; the,” “branch, so”
- **Line 7:** “streams; dead”
- **Line 10:** “startled, and”
- **Line 11:** “Significance. Superstition”

CONSONANCE

Consonance comes fast and furious in "November Cotton Flower," shaping the poem's meaning as well as its music. Many of these repeated sounds are sibilant, giving the language a harsh, hissing quality that evokes the chilly blasts of "winter's cold."

Other examples of consonance also add to the poem's stark picture of decay. The /nch/ sound in "branch" and "pinched" (line 4) itself sounds pinched and nasal, while the heavy, thudding /d/ sounds in "dead birds were found [...] hundred feet below the ground" (lines 7-8) capture the birds' lifelessness. By contrast, the delicate /l/ consonance of "flower bloomed" suits the sudden, delicate beauty of the cotton flower.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “coming,” “cold”
- **Line 2:** “c,” “otton-stalks look,” “rusty,” “seasons”
- **Line 3:** “cotton,” “scarce,” “southern snow”
- **Line 4:** “branch,” “so,” “pinched,” “slow”
- **Line 5:** “Failed,” “function”
- **Line 6:** “to take”
- **Line 7:** “dead birds,” “found”
- **Line 8:** “hundred,” “ground”
- **Line 9:** “Such,” “season,” “flower bloomed”
- **Line 10:** “folks,” “startled,” “soon assumed”
- **Line 11:** “Significance. Superstition saw”
- **Line 12:** “Something,” “seen”
- **Line 13:** “that,” “without,” “trace”
- **Line 14:** “Beauty,” “so sudden,” “that time”

ENJAMBMENT

The poem contains four examples of enjambment, in lines 6-7, 7-8, 10-11, and 11-12.

Enjambment often emphasizes the word or phrase just before and/or after the line break. For example, in lines 6-7, it helps emphasize the word "All":

> Drouth fighting soil had caused the soil to take
> All water from the streams [...]

In other words, it helps stress the severity of the drought: *all* the water was gone.

The enjambment in lines 7-8 creates a brief, uneasy moment of suspense after a disturbing detail: "dead birds were found." (*Where* were they found?) Similarly, the enjambment after line 11 seems suspenseful, as if raising a question for a split second. "Superstition saw"—*what*? The first word after the line break

again seems emphatic: these superstitious folks saw "Something" unusual and meaningful.

The enjambment after line 10 is perhaps the most dramatic in the poem, because the first word after the line break is immediately followed by a caesura (in the form of a full stop):

> Old folks were startled, and it soon assumed
> Significance. [...]

Here, enjambment and caesura work together to load the word "Significance" with emphasis—and thereby invest it with greater significance!

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 6-7:** "take / All"
- **Lines 7-8:** "found / In"
- **Lines 10-11:** "assumed / Significance."
- **Lines 11-12:** "saw / Something"

PERSONIFICATION

Personification helps dramatize two key aspects of the poem: the atmosphere of natural decay and the surprising emergence of the cotton flower. Accordingly, this device appears once in each half of the poem. Here's the first example:

> Drouth fighting soil had caused the soil to take
> All water from the streams

The speaker imagines "Drouth"—a variant of "drought"—as being locked in a battle with the soil. The personification of both drought and soil makes the atmosphere seem tenser, as if some aggressive presence is spreading through the landscape. Since the poem is set in the cotton fields of the southern U.S., this tension might symbolize the region's history of racial oppression and conflict.

The sonnet's sestet (final six lines) brings the unexpected blooming of the cotton flower. As a result:

> [...] Superstition saw
> Something it had never seen before:
> Brown eyes that loved without a trace of fear,
> Beauty so sudden for that time of year.

The personified "Superstition" represents a superstitious worldview shared by some members of the community (including, perhaps, the "Old folks"). This detail partly reflects the poem's setting: an agricultural society in which people often have to "read" the land for signs of growth, decay, and so on. In this case, people seem to interpret a natural event as an omen of what lies in store for human society.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 6-7:** "Drouth fighting soil had caused the soil to take / All water from the streams;"
- **Lines 11-12:** "Superstition saw / Something it had never seen before:"

SIBILANCE

"November Cotton Flower" uses prominent sibilance throughout its 14 lines. In fact, every line has at least one sibilant sound. These clustered /s/, /sh/, and /z/sounds create alliteration and consonance.

In the first eight lines, sibilance helps establish an eerie atmosphere of natural decay. Take lines 1-4, for example:

> Boll-weevil's coming, and the winter's cold,
> Made cotton-stalks look rusty, seasons old,
> And cotton, scarce as any southern snow,
> Was vanishing; the branch, so pinched and slow,

Try saying these lines out loud; you can almost hear the whispering or hissing of a cold November wind.

Starting in line 9, the poem seems to shift to a more hopeful mood with the arrival of the cotton flower, but sibilance keeps working its magic:

> Such was the season when the flower bloomed.
> Old folks were startled, and it soon assumed
> Significance. Superstition saw
> Something it had never seen before:

This effect might suggest, however subtly, that any new hope still takes place within the same unsettling context. This desolate landscape—or the troubled society it symbolizes—can't suddenly and fully shake off the effects of past horrors. Sibilance thus contributes to the poem's eerie atmosphere *and* helps sustain it even after the flower blooms. (It's also possible to hear the sibilance in the closing lines as more soothing than the sibilance in the opening lines, which was mixed in with harder /k/ sounds.)

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Boll-weevil's," "winter's"
- **Line 2:** "cotton-stalks," "rusty, seasons"
- **Line 3:** "scarce as," "southern snow"
- **Line 4:** "Was vanishing," "so," "slow"
- **Line 5:** "its," "as"
- **Line 6:** "soil," "caused," "soil"
- **Line 7:** "streams," "birds"
- **Line 8:** "wells"
- **Line 9:** "Such was," "season"

- **Line 10:** “folks,” “startled,” “soon assumed”
- **Line 11:** “Significance. Superstition saw”
- **Line 12:** “Something,” “seen”
- **Line 13:** “eyes,” “trace”
- **Line 14:** “so sudden”

SIMILE

"November Cotton Flower" uses one simile, which appears in line 3 as the poem sets its scene:

> Boll-weevil’s coming, and the winter’s cold,
> Made cotton-stalks look rusty, seasons old,
> And cotton, scarce as any southern snow,

The poem takes place in the southern U.S. (most likely in Georgia, where a number of sections in Toomer's *Cane* are set). In this region, snow is a pretty rare occurrence, and that's the point of the simile: at this time of year, cotton is rare, too. This makes the late-fall appearance of the cotton flower (which usually blooms in summer) seem all the more miraculous and surprising. It's no wonder the "Old folks" (line 10) are "startled" by its arrival.

Yet the mention of snow also complicates whatever hope the flower might symbolize. Just as snow melts quickly in a warm climate like the American South, this new cotton might soon "vanish[]" like the cotton in line 4—and hope itself might prove temporary in the face of reality.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** “cotton, scarce as any southern snow,”

VOCABULARY

Boll-weevil (Line 1) - A small beetle that loves eating cotton. The boll weevil caused huge damage to the cotton industry during the early 20th century.

Cotton-stalks (Line 2) - The stems of the cotton plant.

Southern (Line 3) - Refers to the southern United States (such as Georgia, where much of Toomer's *Cane* is set).

Branch (Line 4) - A stream (often one that flows into a larger stream or river).

Rake (Line 5) - A tool for moving leaves or topsoil.

Drouth (Line 6) - Drought; a prolonged dry spell caused by lack of rainfall.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"November Cotton Flower" is a sonnet comprised entirely of rhyming couplets. This unusual form is sometimes known as a *couplet sonnet* or *Clare sonnet* (after the 19th-century poet John Clare).

Apart from its rhyme scheme, the poem follows the standard sonnet conventions: it has fourteen lines, is written in iambic pentameter (i.e., its lines generally follow a da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM rhythm), and contains a noticeable turn (sometimes known as the "volta").

The turn occurs in the typical place, dividing the poem into an octet (eight lines) and a sestet (six). Here, it marks the blooming of the flower against the bleak backdrop described in the first eight lines. This twist, or element of surprise, formally mirrors the reaction of the "Old folks" who are "startled" to see the cotton flower in November. The placement of the volta at the ninth line is a conventional feature of the Petrarchan sonnet (as opposed to the Shakespearean).

METER

"November Cotton Flower" uses iambic pentameter: lines of five metrical feet that follow an unstressed-STRESSED syllabic pattern (da-DUM | da-DUM | da-DUM | da-DUM | da-DUM). This is both the most common meter in English poetry and the standard meter of the sonnet form. Here's how this meter works in line 3:

> And co-| tton, scarce | as an-| y south-| ern snow,

The poem's meter remains fairly consistent, but its flow is frequently disrupted by caesuras; that is, its sentences often pause or end in the middle of lines. This effect mimics the way the "drouth" (drought) disrupts the flow of water and causes misery throughout the poem's setting.

Sometimes, the poem varies its meter in ways that correspond to its meaning. For example, the phrase "dead birds" in line 7 forms a metrical foot of two stressed syllables (a spondee instead of an iamb). This weighty sound suits the image of fallen, lifeless birds. Line 11 omits a stressed syllable in the third foot:

> Signi- | ficance. | Su- | persti- | tion saw

This omission makes the mid-line pause (caesura) even more pronounced, lending greater weight—or significance—to the word "Significance."

RHYME SCHEME

The poem is a sonnet that uses rhymed couplets throughout,

making its rhyme scheme:

AABBCCDDEEFFGG

Though rhyme is a normal feature of sonnets, this all-couplet version of the form is unusual. It's sometimes called a *couplet sonnet* or *Clare sonnet*, after the 19th-century English poet John Clare. In fact, Toomer's use of this form might be a subtle homage or allusion to Clare, whose poems typically dealt with rural settings—just as "November Cotton Flower" does. The consistent couplets have a simple, almost folksy quality that suits this poem about farming and rural "folks" (line 10).

All of the rhymes in the poem are exact, with the exception of the imperfect rhyme ("saw"/"before") in lines 11-12—though this rhyme would be close to perfect in some southern American accents!

SPEAKER

"November Cotton Flower" isn't much concerned with the identity of its speaker. Instead, the speaker serves as an omniscient narrator, able to describe the bleak landscape in detail *and* report the feelings of the community when the flower unexpectedly arrives (line 9). There's a sense that the speaker knows this region well and can comment on it with authenticity and experience. In that sense, the poem's voice is typical of Toomer's book *Cane*, in which "November Cotton Flower" appears (*Cane* consists of various prose and verse fragments from different perspectives).

SETTING

The poem is set in the southern U.S.—most likely Georgia—during the early 20th century. The boll weevil was particularly devastating for the cotton industry during the 1920s, which is also when Toomer published the book (*Cane*) in which this poem appears.

The speaker paints a bleak picture in which nature is struggling. The weevil has wreaked havoc, and even though it's only November, the winter is already miserable. A drought has caused streams to dry up, and birds are dying from thirst. All in all, the setting is pretty apocalyptic! Symbolically, this bleakness may be meant to evoke the horrors of slavery and the racism associated with the South and cotton production.

But this initial picture forms a dark backdrop against which the cotton flower can bloom and shine. The flower seems like a small triumph *over* the poem's setting, perhaps even a fledgling symbol of hope. That said, the poem is careful not to appear too optimistic.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Jean Toomer was a poet, playwright, and novelist who lived from 1894 to 1967. He is most famous work is *Cane*, an experimental novel that chronicles the experience of Black characters across the American North and South. *Cane*, published in 1923, features a variety of voices, styles, and forms, including both poetry and dialogue.

"November Cotton Flower" is one of the numerous poems in *Cane*, and it appears, ominously, just after a rat has been accidentally slain in the preceding poem, "Reapers." *Cane* was well-received at the time of publication and is now considered a groundbreaking work of American literature and an important example of High Modernism. Modernist artists and authors like Toomer sought to break free from traditional forms and wanted to explore new modes of self-expression as well as some of the darker elements of human nature. Toomer's Modernism is clear in this poem itself, which puts a twist on the classic sonnet form.

Toomer is also often linked with the Harlem Renaissance, a golden age of creativity and production among Black artists and intellectuals that began in the Harlem neighborhood of New York City. Toomer himself bristled at this association, however; while his work showed a deep interest in and respect for Black experiences, Toomer did not want to be perceived solely through the lens of his race.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Toomer wrote *Cane*, a novel that spans the American North and South, during what's known as the Great Migration. This period, lasting from roughly 1916 to 1970, involved the mass migration of Black Americans from the South towards the more urban environments of the North, West, and Midwest.

The Great Migration was spurred by the desire to escape the racist Jim Crow policies still dominating the Deep South throughout the early 20th century. Though slavery had been abolished in 1865, racial segregation and violent discrimination remained rife across the region. (It should be noted, however, that the North was no racial utopia, and attacks on Black Americans happened throughout the country.) The Harlem Renaissance grew out of this mass migration, as many Black artists and intellectuals settled in New York City.

Modernism, meanwhile, stemmed in part from artists' disillusionment with society—and its supposed technological progress—following the enormously violent First World War.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Harlem Renaissance Introduction — Learn more about

the cultural movement with which Toomer was often linked—despite his protests. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/145704/an-introduction-to-the-harlem-renaissance)

- The Great Migration — Learn more about the mass movement of Black Americans out of the Deep South in the mid-20th century. (https://www.britannica.com/event/Great-Migration)
- Toomer's Biography — An in-depth article about Toomer's life. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/jean-toomer)
- Toomer and Race — An article exploring Toomer's attitude towards racial division. (https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2019/01/14/how-jean-toomer-rejected-the-black-white-binary/)
- America, Cotton, and Racism — A podcast exploring the role of cotton production in the American economy and its relationship with slavery and oppression. (https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/30/podcasts/1619-slavery-cotton-capitalism.html)

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