Hemingway and the Black Renaissance
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Hemingway exemplified the spirit of the twenties in America more vividly than any other contemporary American novelist.

—Wallace Thurman, *Infants of the Spring* (1932), 32

In a June 28, 1957, letter, Zora Neale Hurston wrote:

You know about the literary parties, etc. that sap everything out of you. Ernest Hemmingway [sic], also a Scribners author, beats me hopping around and living informally. He suggested that I run over to the Isle of Pines [sic], an island belonging to Cuba and buy a spot. It is not so well built up and one can find quiet there to work. He did his last book there and is going back. (Kaplan 1992, 755)

Hurston’s letter implies that she and Hemingway were old pals, chatting frequently at parties and perhaps corresponding on artistic matters. Unfortunately there is no evidence that Hemingway and Hurston actually met, and Hurston most likely was merely name-dropping in the letter. Indeed, she misspelled the author’s name. Yet Hurston’s awareness of Hemingway’s work and her willingness to associate herself with him provides evidence of how she aligned herself artistically with a fellow modernist: even in an imagined conversation, Hemingway has worthwhile advice to give her, a fellow writer with the shared goal of getting “the work done.”
“Modernism,” “American,” and “Harlem Renaissance” are complex, debatable concepts, so uniting them around Hemingway is a problematic task. Yet this essay emerged as a response to a series of now familiar books: Nathan Huggins’s *Harlem Renaissance* (1971), David Levering Lewis’s *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (1981), and Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992).\(^1\) Morrison wrote that Hemingway’s African American characters were “artless” and “unselfconscious,” and that he “has no need, desire or awareness of [African Americans] either as readers of his work or as people existing other than in his imaginative world” (69).

What is striking in Morrison’s indictment is the sharp delineation of literary history along racial, rather than aesthetic, lines. She may oversimplify the complexity of Hemingway’s work as a whole, or she may deny that the modernist milieu he was working in was a cultural hybrid. It may be difficult to forgive Hemingway his offensive, insensitive, and at times stereotypical characterizations of African Americans, Cubans and other nonwhites. Yet Hemingway’s work, in particular *Torrents of Spring* (1926), exists in a cultural cluster that unites him with many key figures of the Harlem Renaissance such as Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, and Wallace Thurman, by what I will call “two degrees of separation.” John Guare’s 1990 play *Six Degrees of Separation* explores the existential premise that everyone in the world is connected to everyone else in the world by a chain of no more than six acquaintances. In the America of the 1920s, modernist writers were separated by no more than two degrees, or two people, uniting much of the artistic production along aesthetic, rather than racial distinctions. As Sieglinde Lemke writes:

Concomitant with the white appropriation of black art was a move by blacks to reappropriate European primitivist modernism. Black intellectuals and artists relied on artistic and ideological impulses derived from European cultures. The Harlem Renaissance is highly indebted to its cultural other. Since European avant-garde artists tried to keep the Negro elements incognito, it is not surprising that Alain Locke sought to unveil this role and use it as a starting point to construct a New Negro and, in the process, a “New White” as well. (Lemke 1998, 146–47)

This essay will focus on three figures influential in the Harlem Renaissance: Sherwood Anderson, Claude McKay, and Langston Hughes.

The main support of the Harlem Renaissance movement came from the emerging mass media and magazine culture of the 1920s, the *Nation,*
the New Republic, American Mercury, the Liberator, Modern Quarterly, and the like. These magazines were the site of cross-pollination, where the cultural hybrid of modernism thrived. In this regard, the aesthetic of the Harlem Renaissance and Hemingway’s understanding of modernism coexist, as, in Daniel Singal’s words, modernism “connotes a radical experimentation of artistic style, a deliberate cultivation of the perverse and decadent, the flaunting of outrageous behavior designed to shock the bourgeoisie” (8). Like many writers of the Harlem Renaissance, Hemingway published in the New Republic and the New Masses, and read the New Yorker regularly.

According to George Hutchinson:

Institutionalization of movements are especially interesting because of the way the clustering of audiences and contributors linked people across boundaries of genre as well as of race. The new writing appeared in a broadly interdisciplinary context—concerned with new developments in anthropology, social theory, literary criticism, and political commentary. Thus although a book review or poetry editor might have a slightly different political and social orientation from that of the chief editorial writers, the mutual attractions were stronger than the repulsions. The different magazines institutionalized, to a certain extent, different approaches to American cultural reality. They talked back and forth to each other and swapped subscribers. Advertisements appeared in The New Republic, for example, offering readers reduced-rate joint subscriptions to The New Republic (a weekly) and The Atlantic and American Mercury (two monthlies); and in The Nation offering joint subscriptions with The Liberator, The Survey, The Century or The New Republic. (Hutchinson 1995, 127–28)

The Nation and the New Republic in particular tended to push the “American tradition” as exemplified in the works that we call today the American Renaissance, along with Emily Dickinson and Mark Twain. Indeed, one could argue that Hemingway’s comments that all great American literature descends from Huckleberry Finn grew out of his immersion in the world of these magazines, as did his specific comments on Moby-Dick and Melville in Green Hills of Africa (1935).

Perhaps the most significant figure in understanding Hemingway’s connections to the key figures in the Harlem Renaissance is Sherwood Anderson. The story of the rise and fall of Hemingway and Anderson’s relationship is a familiar one and will not be fully summarized here, but I will point out for emphasis what Hemingway clearly learned from
Anderson: he began to understand his subject matter, what was real, raw, and authentic. He began to understand form, how to move from his direct, Kiplingesque poems to the vignettes of In Our Time (1925), to the unwieldy experimentations of “My Old Man,” to the more concise, powerful structuring of “Cat in the Rain.” When Hemingway launches his attack upon Anderson and Dark Laughter (1925) in Torrents of Spring (1926), it is an attack upon what Hemingway understands as Anderson’s sentimentality, his romanticizing and essentializing his African American characters. Hemingway parodies Anderson’s dialogue, his reverence for the little town, the railroad tracks, the “beanery” with its elderly waitress, even his anxious asides to the reader: “Spring was coming. Spring was in the air.”

Hemingway justified his attack on Anderson on aesthetic rather than personal grounds. Anderson’s work was flawed because it was sentimental; it romanticized life. The year 1925 was a crucial year in Hemingway’s development as a writer, as he was solidifying the lessons he had absorbed from a cluster of mentors, Anderson, Gertrude Stein, and Ezra Pound. In a letter to his father from that year, Hemingway wrote:

You see I’m trying in all my stories to get the feeling of actual life across—not just depict life—or criticize it—but to actually make it alive. So that when you have read something by me you actually experience the thing. You can’t do this without putting in the bad and the ugly as well as what is beautiful. Because if it is all beautiful you can’t believe in it. (Letters 153)

Hemingway’s definition of his own aesthetic echoes Daniel Singal’s, as he is trying to cultivate the “bad and the ugly” to shock his audience, many of whom resided in suburbs such as his own hometown, Oak Park. As Hemingway rejected Anderson’s aesthetics and embraced Stein’s, he was shifting his subject matter, his understanding of form, and his attempts at lyrical epiphanies occurring in the minds of small-town characters.

As his best-selling book but a critical failure, Dark Laughter marked an artistic nadir for Anderson. In a Whitmanesque phase that—perhaps unintentionally—betrayed his modernist themes, Anderson projected more and more of himself onto his African American characters. In 1923, Jean Toomer’s Cane was published, and later that year Anderson wrote to him to call him “the only negro . . . who seems to have consciously the artist’s impulse” (Toomer 1987, 160). Indeed, Toomer identified Anderson’s Winesburg, Ohio (1919) as a book he read before he went down to
Georgia to collect much of the material for *Cane*. To Toomer, Anderson also wrote: “I want to write not about the American negro, but out of him . . . to my mind there is a thing to be done as big as any of the great masters ever tackled” (*Letters of Sherwood Anderson* Letters 68–69). It is interesting to note too that in his letters to Toomer, Anderson praises him as having created “the first negro work that I have seen that strikes me as being truly negro” (Toomer 1987, 161). Of course Toomer grew to reject the idea that he was creating Africanist literature, and he would grow to bristle at being labeled an African American writer. Thus, Anderson’s aesthetics—his sense of subject matter, form, and his use of lyrical diction—would be eventually rejected by two of his most famous protégés, Hemingway and Toomer, even as he could rightfully assert that he had laid the groundwork of two of the most influential texts of the modernist movement, *In Our Time* and *Cane*.

Interesting to note too is the connection between Hemingway and Toomer through Waldo Frank, editor of the *Seven Arts* and a contributor to the *New Yorker* and the *New Republic*. Frank and Toomer traveled the rural South together in 1921 and 1922, and Frank even posed as a black man. Writing in the book *In the American Jungle*, published in 1937, Frank would praise the earthy wholesomeness of the communities he visited and contrast them with the spiritual depravity of white civilization, seeing the Alabama black as a figure who “drew from the soil, and the sky the grace which is refined like the grace of a flower” (Frank 1937, 57).

Hemingway often expressed disgust for Frank’s work, especially *Virgin Spain* (1926). In chapter 5 of *Death in the Afternoon*, Hemingway parodied Frank, mocking his Whitmanesque lyricism by stating: “True mysticism should not be confused with incompetence in writing which seeks to mystify where there is no mystery but is really only the necessity to fake to cover lack of knowledge or the inability to state clearly” (54). It was the all-knowing sentimentality of Frank’s work that Hemingway loathed, a sentimentality he also found in the work of Anderson. Yet Hemingway still read Frank’s work, and his library contained four of his books: *Virgin Spain*, *The Rediscovery of America* (1929), *Tales from the Argentine* (1930), and *America and Alfred Stieglitz* (1934).

If the *New Yorker* was the place where Hemingway read and grew to loathe Frank, it was also the literary home of one of his most influential early boosters, Dorothy Parker. In a *New Yorker* profile of November 30, 1929, Parker wrote the first article-length biographical treatment of Hemingway, and is credited with identifying the element “grace under
pressure” in his work. In October of 1927 she reviewed *Men Without Women*, writing:

Mr. Hemingway’s style, this prose stripped to its firm young bones, is far more effective, far more moving, in the short story than in the novel. He is, to me, the greatest living writer of short stories. . . . Hemingway writes like a human being. I think it is impossible for him to write of any event at which he has not been present: his is, then, a reportorial talent, just as Sinclair Lewis’s is. But, or so I think, Lewis remains a reporter and Hemingway stands as a genius because Hemingway has an unerring sense of selection. He discards details with a magnificent lavishness; he keeps his words to their short path. He is, as any reader knows, a dangerous influence. The simple thing he does looks so easy to do. (Parker 1973, 461)

Six months later, on March 17, 1928, in the same space in the *New Yorker*, Parker would review Claude McKay’s first novel, *Home to Harlem*. Parker would write: “It is a rough book; a bitter, blunt, cruel, bashing novel. I cannot quite pull myself to the point of agreeing with those who hail it as a wholly fine work . . . there is, of course, his debt—part of what is rapidly assuming the proportions of a National Debt—to the manner of Ernest Hemingway. But it is a good book, and I have yet to see the reader who can put it down once he has opened it” (Parker 1973, 503).

Note Parker’s language: it is the “bitter, blunt, cruel” elements of McKay’s work that unite him with Hemingway. Hemingway and McKay are, in a sense, realistic modernists in that their art draws on authentic experience; it is not sentimental, it does not romanticize. Here we see Parker institutionalizing a modernist aesthetic, using the pages of the *New Yorker* to affirm specific qualities in fiction and to reject others.

McKay, not unexpectedly, had mixed feelings about being paired with Hemingway. In his 1937 memoir, *A Long Way From Home*, he would write:

Hemingway was the most talked about of young American writers when I arrived in Paris. He was the white hope of the ultra-sophisticates. . . . I remember Nina Hammett pointing him out to me at the Dome and remarking ecstatically that Hemingway was a very handsome American and that he had a lovely son. It was long after that before I met him for a moment through Max Eastman. . . . I must confess to a vast admiration for Ernest Hemingway the writer. Some of my critics
thought I was imitating him. But I also am a critic of myself. And I fail to find any relationship between my loose manner and subjective feeling in writing and Hemingway’s objective and carefully stylized form. Any critic who considers it important enough to take the trouble can trace in my stuff a clearly consistent emotional-realism thread, from the time I published my book of dialect verse . . . until the publication of Home to Harlem. . . . I find in Hemingway’s works an artistic illumination of a certain quality of American civilization that is not to be found in any other distinguished American writer. And that quality is the hard-boiled contempt for and disgust with sissyness expressed among all classes of Americans. . . . Mr. Hemingway has taken this characteristic of American life from the streets, the barrooms, the ringsides and lifted it into the real of real literature. In accomplishing this he did revolutionary work with four-letter Anglo-Saxon words. That to me is a superb achievement. (McKay 1937, 249–52)

Here is an embrace and rejection: McKay is calling Hemingway a friend, or at least an acquaintance, noting that they travel in the same circles: Paris, the Dome. He praises Hemingway’s subject matter—the streets, barrooms, and ringsides—yet distances himself from Hemingway’s disdain for “sissyness” or sensitivity, perhaps correctly linking it to homophobia. Yet also note McKay’s declaration of his own aesthetic: he writes in a “clearly consistent emotional-realism thread, a loose manner that dramatizes subjective feeling.” The language McKay uses to describe his own method could be used to describe, of course, Sherwood Anderson’s work as subjective feeling can be characterized as “sentimentality.” McKay is clearly uneasy with elements of the modernist aesthetic that he identifies with Hemingway of the mid-1920s.

It was that same year that McKay’s memoir was published—1937—that Hemingway and Langston Hughes met in Madrid. Hughes was covering the Spanish Civil War for the Afro American; Hemingway was there, too, with NANA, the North American Newspaper Alliance. Hughes would later write of their encounter in I Wonder as I Wander: “Certainly the most celebrated American in Spain was Hemingway. I ran into him and the golden-haired Martha Gellhorn from time to time, and spent a whole day with Hemingway in the late summer at the Brigade Auto Park on the edge of the city. . . . I don’t remember now what we talked about, nothing very profound, I’m sure, and there was a lot of kidding as we shared the men’s food” (364). In his memoir, Hughes goes on to relate the story of a shooting in a Madrid bar, Chicote’s, the shooting that Hemingway drama-
tized in his short story “The Butterfly and the Tank.” Hughes did not witness the shooting, but he heard about it from others, about how a ragged Spaniard of middle age had wandered drunkenly into a bar filled with foreigners, soldiers, and government officials, spraying them with perfume. He is shot dead. To Hughes, what is interesting about Hemingway’s depiction of the incident in “The Butterfly and the Tank” is how Hemingway added a wedding feast earlier in the afternoon to heighten the dramatic effect. Hughes wrote: “In many of my stories I have used real situations and actual people as a starting point, but have tried to change and disguise them so that in fiction they would not be recognizable. I was interested in observing what Hemingway did to real people in his story, some of whom he described photographically” (365). Both Hughes and Hemingway share a consistent modernist aesthetic: drawing on experience as the raw material fiction. Yet where Hemingway is boiling it down to its barest essentials, creating a photographic realism, Hughes is deliberately imagining out of experience, extending it, reimagining it, and reinventing it.

Hemingway never wrote of his encounter with Hughes, and no known correspondence exists between them, yet according to Hughes’s biographer, Faith Berry, Hemingway and Herbert Matthews of the New York Times hosted his farewell party from Spain at the Victoria Hotel. According to Berry, “The party started late and ended late, with wine and scotch flowing until the wee hours of the morning” (269). Indeed, there is a memorable photo of Hemingway, Hughes, Mikhail Koltsov, and Nicolás Guillén taken in Spain, in which a relaxed Hemingway towers over the Russian and the Spaniard and the reserved Hughes stands awkwardly to the side, reluctant to press himself further into the photo.

After Hemingway’s death, Hughes contributed a short paragraph to the Mark Twain Journal, writing: “Hemingway was a highly readable writer whose stories lost no time in communicating themselves from the printed page to the reader, from dialogue on paper to dialogue sounding in one’s own ears and carrying his tales forwards as if the characters were alive and right there (emphasis Hughes’s) in person. The immediacy of Hemingway’s reality conveys itself with more than deliberate speed, and with an impact few other writers so quickly and compactly achieve” (19). It is the elements of Hemingway’s modernist aesthetic that Hughes is praising: immediacy, realism, authentic dialogue, and, implicitly, his brutal subject matter.

The emerging world of the mass media created a crucial aesthetic community, drawing together a broad range of writers under the umbrella of modernism. It integrated, rather than segregated, and Hemingway’s fiction modeled an aesthetic that was broadly received. And he was deeply aware
of emerging fiction without noting the emerging category of the Harlem Renaissance. He was interested in the community of fiction. As Michael North notes in *The Dialect of Modernism*:

> Racial commonality was not to be found in any nationalist theory of language, no matter how democratic. Instead, it was to be found in the remapping of language across national boundaries and also across boundaries between the practical and the decorative, the concrete and the ephemeral, motivated and conventional, dialect and standard. (194–95)

There exist numerous other connections between Hemingway and the key figures of the Harlem Renaissance: Hemingway was present in Paris in 1925 at the Rue de L’Odéon to hear Paul Robeson sing; Robeson dined with Gertrude Stein after a letter of introduction from Carl Van Vechten; Hemingway’s library contained Van Vechten’s 1926 novel *Excavations*, which Hemingway would label in his 1929 inventory “evacuations.” Moreover, Nancy Cunard would buy Three Mountains Press from Hemingway’s good friend Bill Bird, and go on to publish the magazine *Negro*, bringing together black French surrealists, collectors of African art, transatlantic modernists like Pound, and members of the avant-garde such as William Carlos Williams and W. E. B. DuBois, as well as Zora Neale Hurston (North 1994, 189). When considering the genealogy of modernism in American literature, Barbara Johnson writes: “The terms black and white often imply a relation of mutual exclusion. This binary model is based on two fallacies: the fallacy of positing the existence of pure, unified, separate traditions . . . as if there could really remain such a thing as cultural apartheid, once cultures enter into dialogue or conflict. Cultures are not containable within boundaries” (Johnson 1989, 42).

Hemingway did not participate in the Harlem Renaissance per se, yet he coexisted in cultural clusters of exchange and influence, sharing with Hughes, Hurston, McKay, and others an aesthetic that sought to shock with an allegiance to depicting both ugliness and beauty. And this aesthetic allegiance to modernism may be Hemingway’s greatest legacy, extending beyond the 1920s. Indeed, from the vantage point of the early twenty-first century, it is easy to forget how long a shadow Hemingway cast over literature during the first half of the twentieth. As Ralph Ellison overstates, Hemingway “tells us more about how Negroes feel than all the writings done by those people mixed up in the Negro Renaissance” (O’Meally 1985, 755). Ellison clarifies what he meant in 1964, when he explained that all that Hemingway wrote was “imbued with a spirit beyond the
tragic with which I could feel at home, for it was very close to the feeling of the blues, which are perhaps, as close as Americans can come to expressing the spirit of tragedy” (Ellison 1964, 140). Ellison, Hemingway, Hughes, Hurston, and McKay were all, in their own way, telling the tragic truth of American life.

Notes


4. See Brash and Sigman’s *Hemingway’s Library* (132).

5. Holcomb has written an insightful article in which many of these elements are explored more fully; see “The Sun Also Rises in Queer Black Harlem.”

6. Hughes could only have read this story in the December 1938 issue of *Esquire*, another example of how the mass media linked modernist writers on aesthetic—rather than racial—terms.

7. See Mullen’s *Langston Hughes in the Hispanic World*.

8. See Duberman’s *Paul Robeson* (381).

Works Cited


