respected Wright’s work and I knew him, but this is not to say that he ‘influenced’ me,” Ralph Ellison wrote to critic Irving Howe. “I sought out Wright because I had read Eliot, Pound, Gertrude Stein and Hemingway, and as early as 1940 Wright viewed me as a potential rival. . . . But perhaps you will understand when I say he did not influence me if I point out that while one can do nothing about choosing one’s relatives, one can, as an artist, chose one’s ‘ancestors.’ Wright was, in this sense, a ‘relative,’ Hemingway an ‘ancestor.’” Indirectly but famously claiming a place for himself in the American canon, Ellison makes one of his more intriguing statements here in “The World and the Jug” (1963, 1964). In Ellison’s view, the “relatives” he inherited—Wright and Hughes—were important but secondary to the “ancestors” he chose—among them Malraux, Dostoyevsky, Eliot, Faulkner, and Hemingway—all of whom presumably shaped him more than Wright had. From this racially diverse lineage, Ellison had the most significant social relationship with Wright, while Hemingway—whom Ellison never met—assumed particular importance in his personal artistic vision. “But most important,” Ellison continues to Howe, Hemingway was a greater artist than Wright, who although a Negro like me, and perhaps a great man, understood little if anything of these (at least to me) important things. Because Hemingway loved the American
language and the joy of writing, making the flight of birds, the loping of lions across an African plain, the mysteries of drink and moonlight, the unique styles of diverse peoples and individuals come alive on the page. Because he was in many ways the true father-as-artist of so many of us who came to writing during the late thirties.

“I will remind you, however,” Ellison concludes, “that any writer takes what he needs to get his own work done from wherever he finds it.” Beyond the absence of women—Nella Larsen and Zora Neale Hurston, perhaps—in Ellison’s patriarchal literary ancestry, one also notices, as Alan Nadel puts it, “the range of influences that forged Ellison’s personal canon out of canonical American literature.” This “personal canon” helped both the person and persona become a significant modern artist and intellectual. As Ellison saw it, tracing a link to Hemingway and other literary masters would grant him a place in the upper echelon of American letters. In this sense, Hemingway wielded marked influence upon him, both stylistically and intellectually. Yet this influence was not passive, as Ellison’s work, aesthetic mind-set, and ways of recasting Hemingway reveal.

Despite what Ellison scholar Lawrence Jackson describes as the “warmly extended mentorships” of Wright and Hughes, as well as his acceptance of their help, Ellison eventually downplayed them in his self-image. Such an act of independence evinces his “artistic struggle for self-definition” and a certain “anxiety” over “literary ancestry and racial attitudes” vis-à-vis his literary ethos. Importantly, “Ellison wanted to assert a fuller spectrum of black humanity, a spectrum that especially went beyond [the] poles of racialist logic” that Ellison found in Howe’s reductive “Black Boys and Native Sons” (1963), which praised Wright but questioned Ellison and Baldwin. “However,” Jackson maintains, “he found that feat difficult to accomplish without reconstructing his own life and arranging the intensity of his influences.” One sees this in Ellison’s mode of embracing his self-selected “ancestors” more openly than his supportive “relatives.” His literary persona was less overtly masculine and publicized than Hemingway’s, but Ellison was no less conscious of—and involved in—his image as a writer, critic, and intellectual.

As he would several other times in his literary life, Ellison echoes Hemingway in marginalizing Wright in “The World and the Jug.” Hemingway similarly reenvisioned his artistic past in denying Sherwood Anderson’s impact on his early work. Anderson, we will recall, was one of the first mentors to read and critique Hemingway’s work; the elder writer also provided letters of introduction when Ernest and Hadley went to Paris
in December 1921. Among other places, Hemingway (re)wrote Anderson’s role in his budding literary life in a 1923 letter to Edmund Wilson:

No I don’t think *My Old Man* derives from Anderson. It is about a boy and his father and race-horses. Sherwood has written about boys and horses. But very differently. It derives from boys and horses. Anderson derives from boys and horses. I don’t think they’re anything alike. I know I wasn’t inspired by him.

I know him pretty well but have not seen him for several years. His work seems to have gone to hell, perhaps from people in New York telling him too much how good he was. Functions of criticism. I am very fond of him. He has written good stories.

Despite such backhanded commentary, Hemingway jettisons Anderson’s impact, anticipating his scathing *The Torrents of Spring* (1926). Forty years later, Ellison’s reserved praise of Wright adopts a similar tone of reconsideration. Ellison acknowledges Wright’s importance as a supportive mentor, but seeks to eclipse him in the process: “I had been a Negro for twenty-two or twenty-three years when I met Wright, and in more places and under a greater variety of circumstances than he had known. He was generously helpful in sharing his ideas and information, but I needed instruction in other values and I found them in the works of other writers [namely, Hemingway and T. S. Eliot].” As Hemingway and other competitive writers had done before him with their early mentors, Ellison veers away from Wright with an act of literary and racial one-upmanship, seen in his ostensibly “greater” experience as a young black man. For Ellison, the “other”—read superior—“values” he learned from Hemingway and his other ancestors trumped any notions of race, politics, or writing he gleaned from the patently supportive Wright. Essentially rewriting his own past in the same way that he recast materials and symbols in his own work, Ellison continues refining his worldly persona—that of an “urbane, avant garde, sapiently literate” writer, which he had begun crafting when he moved to New York in July 1936.

**Embracing “the True Father-as-Artist”**

Ellison’s ways of accepting Hemingway openly and Wright reservedly overlapped on June 4, 1937—the day they saw Hemingway speak at the Second League of American Writers Congress. By that time, Ellison had
been in New York for eleven months. A well-read young man of twenty-
four, he was impressionable, intellectually curious, and eager to soak up
New York's cultural scene. The city brought him into contact with liter-
ary elders while spurring his professional maturation, independent literary
selfhood, and nascent radical politics. Ellison's time in New York, Adam
Bradley has aptly observed, "corresponded with a profound period of self-
discovery and transformation." Having encountered Hughes and Alain
Locke during his first year in the city, he had met Wright about a week
before seeing Hemingway deliver his speech—the only public one of his
life—at Carnegie Hall. At the American Writers Congress, Ellison and
Wright saw "their hero"—the man whom Ellison later called his "ance-
stor" and treated much more exaltedly than his "relative" as his own artis-
tic stock rose in the 1940s and 1950s.

By that summer of 1937, Ellison had read and admired In Our Time
(1925) and Death in the Afternoon (1932), the latter "his guidebook to
the creative process," according to Jackson. Later in the 1930s, Elli-
son, then a quasi-Marxist critic, began an essay in which he described To
Have and Have Not (1937) as the "culmination point" of Hemingway's
"technique, theme, and philosophy," as a novel evincing "a broad[en]ing
 technique." What Barbara Foley has recently termed "the young crit-
ic's proletarian aesthetic" would doubtless have made Ellison excited to
see Hemingway speak at a leftist event. He was additionally impressed
to hear Hemingway denounce fascism in Spain and encourage writers to
convey the utmost truth in their work, perhaps an early indication of the
intellectualized aesthetic Ellison would advocate as an older writer-critic.

Having returned from Spain in mid-May, Hemingway noted in his speech,
"in a time of war—and we are now in a time of war, whether we like it or
not—the [writer's] rewards are suspended. It is very dangerous to write the
truth in war, and the truth is also very dangerous to come by." Ellison
would share Hemingway's idea of the "writer's problem": "It is always
way that it becomes a part of the experience of the person who reads it."  

Because Hemingway's speech had privileged art over toeing a leftist
line, it likely resonated with the young, ambitious Ellison. Although Ellison
was associated with leftist politics and had his political interests piqued by
Marx and Malraux, he never fully embraced (or joined) the Communist
Party, on whose fringes he had worked and written since arriving in New
York in 1936. Like Hemingway, he thought that the writer should ulti-
mately convey truth, experience, and style, rather than follow a particular
political ideology in lockstep. Yet he was also increasingly attuned to the
politics of the Left in his literary youth. His friendships with Hughes and Wright, his readings of Malraux’s *Man’s Fate* and Thomas Mann’s works, and his own leftist writings in the late 1930s and 1940s all contributed to his growing artistic and political consciousness.\(^{17}\) Malraux’s novel, Jackson maintains, was “a sort of springboard for Ellison’s nascent infatuation—which became a deep commitment—with the radical left political and aesthetic movement.”\(^{18}\) In many ways this dual focus led, William Maxwell continues, to Ellison’s “brandishing the related avant-gardist premises of modernism and communism.” Certain reviews and articles from the late 1930s and early 1940s, Maxwell posits, reveal “his commitments to Marxism and to communist aesthetic policy.”\(^{19}\) Both Maxwell and Jackson see 1930s New York as a site of progressive aesthetics and politics, which jointly influenced the young writer whose aesthetic sensibility was ultimately stronger than his concomitantly emerging radicalism.\(^{20}\)

At this highly formative period of meeting Hughes and Wright, Ellison’s growing aesthetic found an exemplar in Hemingway, whose influence he felt, embraced, and rethought throughout his career. For Ellison, his eventual ancestor’s speech echoed his broader “statement of moral and aesthetic purpose which . . . focused my own search to relate myself to American life through literature,” as he fondly recalled in his introduction to *Shadow and Act* in 1964.\(^{21}\) Soon after attending the American Writers Congress, Wright insisted that Ellison try his hand at reviews and short stories; this helped him cut an impressive figure as a writer, radical, and intellectual of increasing promise. Wright “introduce[d] the younger man to serious literary life” and was supportive both professionally and politically.\(^{22}\) Yet Ellison embraced Hemingway more openly and enthusiastically, largely because he felt Hemingway was a better craftsman who spoke to his own interests more strongly.\(^{23}\) For Ellison, artistic kinship superseded racial kinship, hence his exalting such forebears as Joyce and Twain—as well as elevating himself to their status, particularly that of Hemingway, his “true father-as-artist.”

Despite his strong independent streak, Ellison accepted Hemingway’s impact on him, but not without some ambivalence and intellectual autonomy. Hemingway’s influence on Ellison was multifaceted: he informed the style of Ellison’s early work, his broader aesthetic outlook, and his artistic self-image. As Robert O’Meally, John Callahan, Lawrence Jackson, and Arnold Rampersad remind us, Ellison’s fiction reveals Hemingway’s artistic influence: such as the bullfighting symbolism of *Invisible Man* (1952) and the staccato prose and clear imagery of “Hymie’s Bull” (1938), “A Party Down at the Square” (1938), and other early stories. O’Meally
examines *Invisible Man’s* bullfighting references: Invisible and Jack visit El Toro Bar in Spanish Harlem, “a bar from the world of Hemingway” with bullfighting pictures on its walls; as well, Ellison sometimes compares Ras to a bull.24 Ellison refit another Hemingway image in *Invisible Man*: a mirror hanging behind a bar, seen in “The Killers” (1927), “The Sea Change” (1933), *To Have and Have Not*, and other works.25 In Ellison’s novel, Invisible looks at “a scene from a bullfight” which hangs “in the panel where a mirror is usually placed” at the El Toro.26 As he often did in his jazz-like literary aesthetic, Ellison alluded to and refit Hemingway—the mirror is conspicuous by its absence, and he replaces it with another Hemingway marker, an image of a bullfight.

Here I would like to build on the fine scholarship of O’Meally, Callahan, and others on Ellison’s fiction, and examine his letters, essays, and archival papers. These too bear Hemingway’s imprint on Ellison’s intellect and literary sensibility, while showing how he emulated yet tried to revise his “true father-as-artist.” Ellison’s engagement was multivalenced: his early imitation of Hemingway became a more nuanced, intellectual grappling, as Ellison embodied and rearranged aspects of Hemingway’s oeuvre. He admired Hemingway but found his silences about race in America problematic. Notes Brian Hochman, “the trajectory of [Ellison’s] intellectual development ultimately bears witness to a Hemingway that haunts as much as he guides.”27 This conflicted engagement embodied its own mode of influence, with Ellison exerting his literary independence and questioning Hemingway’s notions of race and morality even while admiring him.

In this sense, the Hemingway–Ellison dialectic merges two decisive influences on Ellison’s creativity: other writers and jazz. A musician by training as well as at heart, Ellison approached his writing as he thought jazz musicians approached music: learning, studying, and then rearranging tradition to create a signature work. Reading and revising literary tradition was integral to the creative process he felt he shared with jazz musicians. As he observed in a speech at West Point in 1969, each “knows his rhythms; he knows the tradition of his form, so to speak, and he can draw on an endless pattern of sounds which he recombines . . . into a meaningful musical experience.”28 This, in Callahan’s words, enabled “Ellison’s artistic identity to emerge in an ambidextrous, advantageous equilibrium between music and literature.”29 His appreciation and emulation of different authors, types of music, and cultural archetypes ballasted the “composite models of self” that comprised his well-rounded literary image.30 For Ellison, the artist needed to know “tradition” before remaking it into something “meaningful,” into something original yet familiar.
While refining and personalizing his critical voice, Ellison followed the call of another potential “relative,” Alain Locke, whose “influence on Ellison would prove more cultural than personal.” Ellison had met Locke at Tuskegee in March 1935 and again in New York on July 5, 1936; in a memorable literary episode, Ellison reconnected with Locke and met Langston Hughes, who was talking with Locke in the lobby of the Harlem YMCA. Ultimately Hughes had a greater impact on him. “Meeting Hughes would change his life forever,” Rampersad posits, likely a reason for Ellison’s later dismissive review of Hughes’s *The Big Sea*, published in 1940. Nevertheless, Ellison shared Locke’s desire for “indigenous criticism on the part of the creative and articulate Negro himself,” as Locke had written in *Opportunity* in January 1936. His chosen literary pedigree was complex: he befriended and was supported by such Harlem Renaissance “relatives” as Hughes, Locke, and Wright; he sought a viable “indigenous criticism” and intellectualism on his own; and he feverishly read and modeled some of his literary self-image after such white “ancestors” as Eliot, James, Malraux, and Melville.

Ellison’s mode of echoing and recasting established texts and tropes undergirded what Alan Nadel terms his “visibly integrated literature”; for instance, *Invisible Man* and his essays reveal Ellison merging his own voice with music, myth, and other authors’ works while imprinting his creative signature on them. Ellison approached and treated Hemingway similarly; he defined his own literary vision primarily with—but also against—that of his “ancestor.” In the process, he offered a series of what O’Meally has rightly called “Hemingway riffs.” Such intellectual riffing shows Ellison playing along with Hemingway, yet diverging from him on matters of race and, to borrow from *Invisible Man*, the author’s “social responsibility” to examine it. He read, studied, and followed Hemingway’s work assiduously; he was eager to learn from, respect, but then move beyond him. His aesthetic sensibility entailed a recasting of literary forebears, some of whose work he read, respected, and even transcribed in his early years.

Although he saw Hemingway as a “true father-as-artist” and accepted his influence, Ellison did not do so unreservedly. Rather, he refit elements of his work while filling in some of the gaps he felt Hemingway had left—particularly about black characters and their conflicting readings of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885). One sees here what Shelley Fisher Fishkin calls “that key strain of American literary history that runs from Twain to Hemingway and Ellison and innumerable white and black writers in the twentieth century.” Regarding style and dialogue, Hemingway, Ellison, and other modern writers partly embodied Twain “in their efforts
to translate oral culture into print”—seen in the stoical, clipped dialogue in Hemingway’s work and the vernacular speech of *Invisible Man* and Ellison’s unfinished second novel. Their respective linkages to Twain colored Ellison’s reading of Hemingway’s influence on him. When Ellison assessed Hemingway critically, he often invoked Twain’s example. In this particular “strain of American literary history,” he felt himself to be Hemingway’s (and thus Twain’s) stylistic heir, and to be Twain’s (but not Hemingway’s) moral heir.

While (re)considering and riffing on his literary past, Ellison played a variation on Hemingway’s mode of situating himself vis-à-vis his literary ancestors. Whereas Hemingway had distanced himself from Stein, Anderson, Fitzgerald, and many others unkindly, Ellison acknowledged the influence of his self-chosen “ancestors.” At the same time, he showed “impatience with fellow black writers and the black literary critics” as his career advanced in the 1940s and 1950s. While sharing some of Hemingway’s tastes and ideas about the writing life, Ellison was also stridently competitive. One sees this in his biting reviews of Hughes’s *The Big Sea*, J. Saunders Redding’s *Stranger and Alone* (1950), and in his often-tense relationships with Wright, James Baldwin, Chester Himes, Nikki Giovanni, and Amiri Baraka. Hemingway was harsh toward his mentors, particularly when they had supported him. In addition to his letters, he criticized Stein in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940) and *A Moveable Feast* (1964; 2009), Anderson in *The Torrents of Spring*, and Fitzgerald in “The Snows of Kilimanjaro” (1936) and *A Moveable Feast*. Despite being influenced by these and other authors, Hemingway disdained being thought influenced by others whom he considered inferior, as Michael Reynolds, Scott Donaldson, and others have shown.

Ellison would follow suit with Hughes and other “fellow black writers,” but not so much with Hemingway. His reading of and engagement with Hemingway effected psychological influence, but without the overt Bloomian influence-anxiety seen between Hemingway and Stein, Hemingway and Anderson, or Ellison and Wright. Although with some ambivalence, Ellison refined his own thematic concerns and literary sensibility vis-à-vis Hemingway’s style, dedication to craft, and what he wrote—and did not write—about race in America. With his “ancestors,” Ellison “would take from the great masters—black or white—and improvise, extending their art as he create[d] his own.” For Ellison the writer-musician, Hemingway’s theme would cue his own necessary variation, his mode of “extending” others’ work, ideas, and moralities into Ellisonian form.
Recombining, Retyping, and Collecting

In the early 1930s, Ellison read Hemingway’s *Esquire* pieces, mostly in the barbershops of Oklahoma City where he spent a lot of time as a young man. Encountering Hemingway as the quintessential masculine writer, Ellison’s interests were doubly piqued by his *Esquire* work, in which he self-indulgently chronicled his Gulf Stream fishing and trips to Africa, Europe, and Cuba. At such a formative time, Callahan notes, “style was the donnée of art and personality” for Ellison. Both Hemingway’s work and masculine persona revealed key facets of the writer’s life that Ellison was seeking—a personal and literary “style.” His “Oklahoma senses were attracted to this man, a writer whose every utterance, down to his style of description, exuded masculinity.” Such *Esquire* pieces as “Marlin Off the Morro” (Autumn 1933), “A. D. in Africa” (April 1934), and “Remembering Shooting-Flying” (February 1935) capture Hemingway’s travels, ideas about writing, and strongly masculinized, strongly public personality.

Ellison’s emerging literary senses were also drawn to Hemingway, particularly *Death in the Afternoon*. In Ellison’s introduction to *Shadow and Act*, the descendant both shared and personalized one of his ancestor’s challenges. For Hemingway, “the greatest difficulty, aside from knowing truly what you really felt, rather than what you were supposed to feel, and had been taught to feel, was to put down what really happened in action, what the actual things were which produced the emotion that you experienced.” Taking this passage as his theme, Ellison offered his own variation on the writer’s challenges:

For I found the greatest difficulty for a Negro writer was the problem of revealing what he truly felt, rather than serving up what Negroes were supposed to feel, and were encouraged to feel. And linked to this was the difficulty, based upon our long habit of deception and evasion, of depicting what really happened within our areas of American life, and putting down with honesty and without bowing to ideological expediencies the attitudes and values which give Negro American life its sense of wholeness.

In his literary youth, Ellison modeled aspects of his creative sensibility after Hemingway and other writers, creating his “very mixed literary bloodlines” to (white) ancestors and (black) relatives. Fishkin’s sense of Ellison’s diverse artistic lineage echoes what Ellison himself described in “Going to the Territory” (1980) as “the sharing of bloodlines and cul-
tural traditions” and “the blending and metamorphosis of cultural forms” endemic to his own work and to American literature and culture.48

“With the help of Hemingway,” Jackson adds, “Ellison began to develop a mature code with which to determine literary merit as well as personal integrity.”49 Ellison’s challenge was using personal, social, and racial experience to capture the innate “wholeness” of “Negro American life” that he sought in Invisible Man and his unfinished second novel while recasting Hemingway’s ideas to fit his own vision. Both accepting and seeking to match the example of Hemingway, Ellison charts his influence throughout Shadow and Act. His Paris Review interview (1955), “The World and the Jug,” “Hidden Name and Complex Fate” (1964), and other writings praise Hemingway’s work and stature; Ellison even sent Mary Hemingway a copy of Shadow and Act, perhaps as a vicarious gesture of gratitude.50 Looking back on his early writing life after Invisible Man, Ellison acknowledges that Hemingway’s style and rich experience had inflected his own work and literary thought, as had Melville, Faulkner, Joyce, and others. With Hemingway, he encourages us to “believe him” because “he’s been there,” both stylistically and experientially.51

As his career grew, Ellison continued to admire Hemingway. After Invisible Man—which won the National Book Award over The Old Man and the Sea (1952)—Hemingway was still “an enduring presence in Ellison’s intellectual life.”52 When he won the Nobel Prize in November 1954, the Times Book Review published an interview in which he mentioned Isak Dinesen, Bernard Berenson, and Carl Sandburg as Nobel Prize–worthy writers. Having read this interview, Ellison then revisited Dinesen’s work himself. Writing to Albert Murray in April 1955, he displays Hemingway’s impact: “I’m catching up on the gal he recommended as worthy of the Nobel Prize, Isak Dinesen, whose Seven Gothic Tales I read . . . during the thirties. I’m in the midst of Out of Africa and it’s really very good. I understand that there are several others and I’m out to find them.”53

As he also wrote to Murray in April 1960, Ellison later revisited Stephen Crane with Hemingway in mind. Hemingway had mentioned in Green Hills of Africa (1935) that “The Open Boat” and “The Blue Hotel” were particularly strong. Again Ellison read what his literary model did: “I’m also doing an introduction to a paperback collection of Stephen Crane’s work. I hadn’t paid much attention to him beyond following Hemingway’s recommendation of the Red Badge, ‘The Blue Hotel,’ and ‘The Open Boat.’”54 This piece was eventually published as “Stephen Crane and the Mainstream of American Fiction” (1960), in which Ellison praises Crane’s “unique vision of the human condition,”
while iterating that his “strategy of understatement and the technique of impressionism . . . was to point the way for Hemingway and our fiction of the twenties.” Ellison traces a lineage to Hemingway through Crane: he lauds Crane’s moral vision and stylistic influence on Hemingway and on himself.

Unlike Hemingway, Ellison noted Crane’s racial and moral awareness. In the same April 1960 letter to Murray, Ellison observes in light of Crane’s “neglected stories” that he “is revealed as not merely the technical link between Twain and Hemingway, and thus the first of the 20th Century American writers, but in which [sic] he struggles with Mose just as hard as Mark Twain and which mark him the last of the 19th century moralists.” Ellison’s literary independence and quest for the kind of racially “indigenous criticism” that Alain Locke had advocated led him to respect and follow Hemingway but provide the racial awareness his work lacked. Perhaps, Ellison seemingly thought, one way to attain Hemingway’s canonical stature, enhance his own, and articulate his “unique vision of the human condition” was to read what Hemingway wrote and what he read, but not solely as he did.

One also sees Hemingway’s multifaceted influence in Ellison’s archival materials, which round out his intellectual life. In the late 1930s or early 1940s, he mused about Hemingway in a drafted essay of about twenty typed pages, plus some handwritten addenda. In this unpublished piece—both typed and handwritten—Ellison reads Hemingway’s work astutely while trying to set it in a Marxist cast. He quotes from his novels and stories, analyzes his characters (all of whom he sees as versions of Nick Adams), and notes his sharp attunement to the masses. For the Ellison of the Left, Hemingway embodies “true craftsmanship,” something he himself sought; furthermore, “trained eyes and sensitive ears plus the mastery of an art which seeks to root itself in reality and in people, if guided by real sincerity which transcends the lines of class, will, if the artist survives, arrive at many of the truths discovered by Marx.” As William Maxwell, Barbara Foley, and others have observed, Ellison’s 1930s and 1940s articles and reviews demonstrate how “experiencing and understanding class difference was vital to American writers,” as well as how “his endorsement of cardinal principles of Popular Front–era CP politics” undergirds much of his early work.

Indeed, Ellison was only one of many American writers who felt Hemingway’s pull. By this time, Hemingway was very well known—he had published at least ten books and For Whom the Bell Tolls was (or would be) a best seller and Book of the Month Club selection. As well, he
was the definitive writer-as-celebrity, keeping his über-masculine persona in the public realm even when he was not publishing new work. Thus, it was appropriate for a nascent writer-intellectual to consider the work of such an established author whose “prose is taut like the string of a violin, sensitive to the least pressure of thought, ready to send vibrations of far reaching effect to the alert reader. To the not so alert reader there is enough on the surface to satisfy: action, precise naturalistic description of scenery and revelation of new details in familiar scenes.”

Ellison implicitly notes the palpability of Hemingway’s work, what the latter called in *Green Hills of Africa* a “fourth and fifth dimension” of prose transcending simple description of character, emotion, and setting. Ellison continues: “Hemingway’s stories are constructed by a strict selection of each word. The naturalistic description has an organic connection with the emotional state of the characters. The seemingly trivial dialogue with its repetitions and formalized rhythms are made to carry a load of psychoanalysis”—such as the tensely “dialectical preparation of the dialogue” of the 1927 story “Hills Like White Elephants.” The budding Ellison reads and feels Hemingway’s work: “One is made to share the experience of the characters, by the careful manner in which perceptions are guided by the author” in “Big Two-Hearted River” and “An Alpine Idyll,” published in 1925 and 1927, respectively.

While he praises Hemingway for having written such rich prose and “pinned his artistic salvation in craftsmanship,” Ellison anticipates his own later criticisms:

The philosophy of simplicity, however, was to have a vitalizing effect upon his craftsmanship. Though it caused him to limit himself to a very narrow perspective it is also the cause of the high artistic merit of his writing. With the intention of penetrating to the fundamentals of death in all his subjects, he rejected all extraneous meanings, shadings of thought, and literary fat, producing a prose of classical simplicity and beauty.

Hemingway’s influential style notwithstanding, the more politicized Ellison notes its downside: a stylistic narrowness that, although sound and influential, prevented Hemingway from exploring such themes as American racial politics fully. Moreover, an “over-simplification of life is not conducive to seeing it whole,” despite the great “technical accuracy and precision” of Hemingway’s work. The “whole” picture, for Ellison, contained much more about class, race, and black humanity than Heming-
way’s work examined, an absence that he tried to fill as a novelist and critic.

“If the younger generation was to proffer ‘artistic gifts,’” Houston A. Baker Jr. writes, “such gifts had first to be recognizable as ‘artistic’ by Western, formal standards and not simply as unadorned or primitive folk creations.” One sees virtually the same in O’Meally’s “riffs” construct and Horace Porter’s notion of Ellison’s improvisatory and extending aesthetic—namely, that his early essays and later work offer “variations and deepenings of forms,” texts, and ideas, as McKay, Cullen, and other black moderns did in the 1920s and 1930s.66

Ellison’s analysis of Hemingway has a somewhat tentative critical tone—aptly so, given that he was a man in his late twenties writing about an established author in largely positive terms but through a Marxian lens. Yet in stating that Hemingway “writes with an eye to simplicity and with a narrow focus,” Ellison suggests that he wanted something underneath the strong, pared-down Hemingway style—namely a more incisive moral awareness.67 In Ellison’s case, Hemingway was worthy of admiration, despite some philosophical narrowness that he expanded in his own vision of America. Here we see a would-be writer and Marxist praising the man whose limits he later criticized but whose terse style and concrete imagery he emulated in such early stories as “A Party Down at the Square.” For Callahan, this 1940s-era story embodies “Hemingway’s techniques and effects” while describing a lynching and other Ellisonian themes.68

To this mimetic end, Ellison retyped excerpts from A Farewell to Arms (1929) and For Whom the Bell Tolls and all of “The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber” (1936). The retyped passages from the novels are undated, but Ellison likely created them in the 1940s, when he was still finding his voice by studying and transcribing such predecessors as Malraux and Faulkner. For one, he copied an excerpt from chapter 31 of A Farewell to Arms, in which Frederic tells of the executions of deserting officers during the Caporetto Retreat, and in which Hemingway employs crisp, spare imagery and first-person narration. Ellison was drawn to this passage—starting with “They were questioning some one else. This officer too was separated from his troops” and going to the end of the chapter, “I held onto the timber with both hands and let it take me along. The shore was out of sight now.”69 In his thirtieth-anniversary introduction to Invisible Man, Ellison mentioned reshaping A Farewell to Arms in his fledgling novel about a black pilot in a Nazi POW camp, in particular Frederic’s discussion of “abstract” and “obscene” words in chapter 27. Yet, Rampersad clarifies, “[t]his plot invited trouble. Ralph knew next to nothing about
the military, or about prison camps,” despite wanting to tell the story of “a captured black airman.” Ellison eventually abandoned this project in the late 1940s for *Invisible Man*, and only a few manuscript pages remain in the Library of Congress.\(^70\)

With *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Ellison retyped an extended passage from chapter 16, in which Jordan, Pablo, and Agustín exchange very tense dialogue about the war effort, Jordan’s place as an American in the Spanish Civil War, and their respective senses of their masculinity. “‘Listen, *Inglés,*’ Agustín said,” this excerpt begins, going through several pages and ending with “‘Say it,’ Agustín said to him.”\(^71\) Written in third-person omniscient, this extended passage effectively presents Jordan’s interiority, as he thinks of the war and Pablo while talking with his fellow anti-fascist guerillas. Ellison was drawn to Hemingway’s two war novels, passages that showed him something about style, tense dialogue, narrative interiority, and explorations of war, masculinity, and place. Presumably he would have studied something of the character relations and dialogue in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* when working on his own early war novel, which sought to examine racial and ethnic difference in a wartime context.

Ellison’s retyping of “The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber” is especially interesting, because it reveals his reading mind at work. Jackson helps us roughly date the retyping of this story to some time after June 1942; Ellison typed the first five pages on the reverse of flyers from a June 26, 1942, celebration of black folk music presented by Earl Robinson and Richard Wright, under the aegis of the Negro Publication Society.\(^72\) As Hochman aptly describes, “it is Hemingway on the surface, folk musical expression and Richard Wright underneath.”\(^73\) This juxtaposition of surfaces, I want to add, embodies Ellison’s ways of reading, studying, and emulating various literary and cultural models. Beyond retyping, Ellison jotted some marginal comments in his version of the story about Hemingway’s technique, as well as the story’s structure, management of time, and interiority. After the opening paragraph—“It was now lunch time and they were all sitting under the double green fly of the dining tent pretending that nothing had happened”\(^74\)—Ellison wrote “What Where When Why” in the margin. He seemed to value Hemingway’s mode of opening the story in medias res and then reconstructing the day’s events that led to the characters’ “pretending that nothing had happened”; namely, that Francis Macomber had run away from a lion, to the disapproval of his wife and Robert Wilson, the proverbial white hunter. A few pages later, as Macomber reflects on his perceived cowardice, Ellison wrote “Flashback” at the paragraph opening “It had started the night before
when he had wakened and heard the lion roaring somewhere up along the river.” Ellison continued to study the story’s arrangement of time, writing “Night of same day” after Macomber’s flashback ends (“It was now about three o’clock in the morning”). A few paragraphs later, Ellison noted “Next day” as the characters share a tense breakfast—tense due both to Macomber’s shame and to the fact that Margot and Wilson had slept together the previous night.

Ellison’s retyping of Hemingway’s story and two major novels bespeaks a close, studious analysis of his style and methods. It was seemingly not enough to read Faulkner, Joyce, and other perceived models; the “musician” in him “respect[ed] imitation as a necessary step toward mastery.” In order to write as they wrote, Ellison may have thought, he had to literally rewrite their work in order to riff on it and experiment with his own. He had established this creative mode early in his literary life, a decade before *Invisible Man*, and largely followed it when working on his vast, never-completed second novel, published eventually as *Juneteenth* in 1999 and *Three Days Before the Shooting . . .* in 2010.

Retyping Hemingway was not the only way Ellison engaged with him. He also—perhaps obsessively—sought, cut out, and collected hundreds of articles, stories, and reviews by and about Hemingway from the 1930s to the 1980s. Among other items, Ellison saved some of Hemingway’s pieces from *Holiday, Look,* and *True,* as well as serialized versions of *Across the River and into the Trees* (1950) and *The Old Man and the Sea.* Ellison kept obituaries published in *Life* and *Time;* notes about Hemingway’s falsely reported death in Africa in January 1954; reviews of such works as *To Have and Have Not,* *For Whom the Bell Tolls,* and *A Moveable Feast*; and articles by Malcolm Cowley, George Plimpton, and others, all of which show Ellison’s concern with Hemingway’s literary standing. Although none of these collected pieces have handwritten annotations as does the retyped version of “The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber,” that Ellison kept so many newspaper and magazine pieces indicates how dedicatedly he tried to maintain—and strengthen—the influential intellectual link he felt.

Ellison even set aside writings by Hemingway’s widow Mary and his brother Leicester; he also kept Mary’s 1986 obituary from the *New York Times.* Ralph and Fanny Ellison became good friends with Mary Hemingway after Ernest’s death and while they worked with the NAACP Legal Defense Fund. They often exchanged letters and shared New York’s social scene in the 1960s and 1970s—such as the American premiere of the Richard Burton–Elizabeth Taylor *The Taming of the Shrew* in 1967, and a PEN
American Center party at Tavern on the Green in 1973. This social relationship with Mary promised Ellison a figurative connection to the man he admired but never knew, while giving Fanny a fellow writer’s wife for a social acquaintance.

By and large, Ellison’s hoarding so much material speaks to the same meticulousness that guided his retyping of Hemingway’s work. Both acts show him following Hemingway’s canonical status while locating himself within the sphere of his influence. Wanting to read and write like Hemingway (and other authors) as his own art was maturing, Ellison thought his work was worthy of admiration, collection, and early imitation. Closely studying Hemingway’s work and ideas showed Ellison a fine style—but also a racial awareness and moral viewpoint in need of expansion.

**A Brave and Startling Omission: The National Book Award**

In early January 1953, *Invisible Man* received the National Book Award. The novel eclipsed the works of two literary “veterans”: Steinbeck’s *East of Eden* and Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea*. Ellison must have felt a sense of great accomplishment in becoming part of the American canon he so valued. Rampersad writes: “Winning the National Book Award—not the publication of *Invisible Man* itself—was transforming Ralph’s life even as he looked on with fascination.” Ellison, furthermore, “was a celebrity” who received myriad offers to read his material publicly, give lectures, and write solicited essays; he would continue such intellectual celebrity throughout his career in the form of visiting professorships, university lectures, commencement addresses, and a broader public intellectualism. When Ellison joined Archibald MacLeish and Bernard DeVoto for the National Book Award ceremony on January 27, 1953, he “took the occasion far more seriously” than they did and delivered a “lofty” speech about his goals for *Invisible Man* and its place in American literary history. As with previous and subsequent works, Ellison’s address—later entitled “Brave Words for a Startling Occasion” in *Shadow and Act*—manifests Hemingway’s influence. Yet Ellison never mentions Hemingway by name in the speech. That he does not refer to Hemingway overtly, while naming James, Twain, and Faulkner, suggests a meaningful silence—a kind of riff on Hemingway’s Iceberg Theory that ironically omits explicit mention of Hemingway.

Whereas *Invisible Man* and several essays play the “Hemingway riffs” that O’Meally has noted, Ellison’s National Book Award offers what we
can call silent riffing on Hemingway and other influences. The occasion’s
gravity, Ellison may have thought, made personal attacks inappropriate,
while engaging with and recasting certain admirable, influential, but limited modern novelists. That Ellison makes no explicit
mention of Hemingway while critiquing some modern fiction indicates
some level of influence-anxiety, but without the more explicit Oedipus
complex that Jackson, Rampersad, and Skerrett identify between Ellison
and Wright. At the same time, Ellison’s implication of Hemingway could
indicate respect for him and the National Book Award, which prevented
Ellison from attacking him explicitly in such an important, dignified
speech. Invoking without actually naming Hemingway, Wright, or others,
Ellison speaks more abstractly of his “usual apprenticeship of imitation,”
“the works which impressed me and to which I owe a great deal,” and
“our current fiction.”  

Given his pattern of trying to have it both ways, as
it were, he paid some homage to “the works” governing his “apprenticeship” while elevating himself and his novelistic achievement above such
formative books and authors.

By saying that he has been “impressed” by several unnamed texts—certainly those of Hemingway and Wright, at least—Ellison reveals a respect
for the literary past even as he notes its limits. This ambivalent act was
typical of his aesthetic of riffing: he acknowledged American literary tradi-
tion but sought to eclipse its novelistic “forms” that “were too restricted
to contain the experience which [he] knew.” As he would also note of
The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn later that year in “Twentieth-Cen-
tury Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity,” Ellison discusses Invisible
Man’s “attempt to return to the mood of personal moral responsibility for
democracy which typified the best of our nineteenth-century fiction,” a
mood that ran counter to the “crisis in the American novel” he sensed.

With this in mind, Ellison says that he eschewed both “the tight,
well-made Jamesian novel” and the more contemporary “‘hard-boiled
novel,’ with its dedication to physical violence, social cynicism and under-
statement. Understatement depends, after all, upon commonly held
assumptions, and my minority status rendered all such assumptions ques-
tionable.” By discussing the “hard-boiled novel” more broadly, Ellison
suggests that Hemingway’s and others’ shortcomings were symptomatic of
the postwar generation and inherent flaws of the genre itself. “[E]xcept for
the work of William Faulkner,” Ellison observed shortly thereafter,

something vital had gone out of American prose after Mark Twain. I
came to believe that writers of that period took a much greater respon-
sibility for the condition of democracy and, indeed, their works were imaginative projections of the conflicts within the human heart which arose when the sacred principles of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights clashed with the practical exigencies of human greed and fear, hate and love.\textsuperscript{84}

While echoing Faulkner’s Nobel Prize address,\textsuperscript{85} Ellison also invokes Hemingway’s comment in \textit{Green Hills of Africa} that “there has been nothing as good since” \textit{The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn}.\textsuperscript{86} Still, he veers from Hemingway in raising a modern author to Twain’s level, positing that “there has been [something] as good since.” Although he does not incorporate Hemingway’s name or exact words here, Ellison nonetheless riffs on Hemingway’s ideas about literature in articulating his own similar—and superior, he may have thought—viewpoint.

A short time later, Ellison privileges nineteenth-century literature over that of the twentieth century in his speech: “in their imaginative economy the Negro symbolized both the man lowest down and the mysterious, underground aspect of human personality. In a sense the Negro was the gauge of the human condition as it waxed and waned in our democracy. These writers were willing to confront the broad complexities of American life,” unlike “so much of our current fiction” that embodied “final and unrelieved despair.” Relatedly, Ellison sought a prose that captured the “diversity of American life with its extreme fluidity and openness,” unlike some of the limited modern writers whom he referenced nonspecifically.\textsuperscript{87} For Ellison, Twain was one of several key nineteenth-century American authors who “understood . . . that the Negro represented the call to their—and their readers’—humanity,”\textsuperscript{88} which he did not find as widely in modern literature while looking through his nineteenth-century lens.

As Ellison told his audience, he was seeking with \textit{Invisible Man} a “novel whose range was both broader and deeper” than most of its modern predecessors; he wanted “to burst such neatly understated forms of the novel asunder” in his quest for literary autonomy.\textsuperscript{89} In many important respects, “Brave Words for a Startling Occasion” embodies Ellison’s literary sensibility before, in, and after \textit{Invisible Man}. Ellison’s text is very much an exploration of novelistic range and forms, particularly in the collage of literary genres, artistic and musical forms, and numerous trajectories (historical, mythical, political, and cultural) that embody \textit{Invisible Man}’s “experimental attitude.”\textsuperscript{90} And, as a product of Ellison’s apprenticeship and early literary life—which clearly involved Hemingway—his
National Book Award address anticipates his more mature and complicated ways of assessing Hemingway in “Twentieth-Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity” and “Society, Morality and the Novel.”

Ellison’s desire for “rich diversity” in American prose, for black characters as “the gauge of the human condition,” and a “willing[ness] to confront the broad complexities of American life” comprised his literary mind-set as he praised the moral compasses of Twain and other nineteenth-century writers. Furthermore, Ellison wanted modern literature to explore “the complexity of human experience”; in learning but then veering from others, he sought a “technical improvisation that create[d] its own originality.” By invoking the moral successes and oversights of, respectively, many American forebears and coevals, Ellison’s National Book Award address revolves around this notion of literature’s “complexity.” He praises nineteenth-century authors for capturing it, chides modern authors for largely ignoring it, and highlights his own attempt to recapture and modernize it in *Invisible Man*. Because he “was now speaking with unprecedented authority for a black American” in light of the award, Ellison articulated what he (and numerous critics) saw as his viable aesthetic vision. He could now provide to the literary establishment the kind of “indigenous criticism” that Alain Locke had advocated in *The New Negro*, called for in *Opportunity* in 1936, and likely spoke about when he addressed Ellison and others at Tuskegee in 1935.

For Houston A. Baker Jr., Ellison was very much aware that “[b]lack writers . . . are always on display, writing a black renaissance and righting a Western Renaissance that was . . . ‘most black, brother, most black,’” as he wrote in *Invisible Man*. In both “writing and righting,” Ellison revealed some ambivalence about the racial absences in Hemingway’s literary sensibility and work, even as he praised him and offered a more complex black humanity in his own work. Hemingway had, for him, written very well but not broadly enough in what the descendant saw as his ancestor’s racially monolithic body of work. In counterpoint to his strong admiration, Ellison played more discordant “Hemingway riffs” in the wake of his National Book Award to advance his own vision and question Hemingway’s example more overtly than he had ever done.

“Mortal Combat”: Ellison’s Readings of Twain and Hemingway

“The thing that’s forgotten is that everyone has to master his craft or profession. Without mastery no one is free, Negro or white. You remember
Hemingway saying he’d fought a draw with Balzac or whoever? Well, it’s right. You enter into mortal combat with the best in your field”—so said Ellison in a May 1952 interview with Harvey Breit of the *Times Book Review*. Here Ellison virtually channels Hemingway, who saw past and present writers as antagonists, particularly those whose influence he felt. Although Ellison was not as combative with Hemingway as the latter was with other writers, he engaged in intellectual “combat” with him, principally over their divergent readings of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and Hemingway’s limited portraits of black humanity and race in America.

In *Green Hills of Africa*—a book teeming with literary allusions and assessments of other writers—Hemingway famously observed: “All modern American Literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*. If you read it you must stop where the Nigger Jim is stolen from the boys. That is the real end. The rest is just cheating. But it’s the best book we’ve had. All American writing comes from that. There was nothing before. There has been nothing as good since.”

Hinting at a certain anxiety of influence vis-à-vis Twain, Hemingway tempers his praise of the novel—noting that it is groundbreakingly “modern” despite Twain’s “cheating.” Hemingway anticipated the above comment in a January 1926 letter to *This Quarter’s* Ernest Walsh: “[I]f you will, now, re-read Huckleberry Finn, honest to God read it as I re-read it only about three months ago, not anything else by Mark Twain, but Huckleberry Finn, and the last few Chapters of it were just tacked on to finish it off by Howells or somebody. The story stops when Jim, the nigger, is captured and Huck finds himself alone and his nigger gone. That’s the end.”

Hemingway seems to miss the notes of cynicism at novel’s end. Huck is disgusted by the violence, corruption, and hypocrisy he has seen, and his lighting out is both a social rejection and a personal escape bespeaking his disillusionment with Tom and many others. Twain had “cheated” insofar as Huck’s attempts to free Jim ring false to the reality of antebellum America, in which an adolescent boy may have been unable to rescue a slave without violence or abolitionist support. As Hemingway saw it, Jim’s being sold by the king is “the real end” because it better reflects the stoicism that he valued. Very few of his own works end happily, and Hemingway rejects Twain’s apparent moral optimism, dismissing the last twelve chapters as cursory, as “just tacked on” by someone else for a seemingly neat ending.

As we might imagine, Ellison read Twain’s novel differently. In “Twentieth-Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity,” Ellison first rebuked Hemingway and Steinbeck, “in whose joint works I recall not
more than five American Negroes” and who “seldom conceive Negro characters possessing the full, complex ambiguity of the human.” Then he faults Hemingway by praising Twain: “Jim is drawn in all his ignorance and superstition, with his good traits and his bad. . . . Jim, therefore, is not simply a slave, he is a symbol of humanity, and in freeing Jim, Huck makes a bid to free himself of the conventionalized evil taken for civilization by the town.” As such, Huck and Jim comprise Twain’s “compelling image of black and white fraternity,” in which Jim is a “rounded human being.”

To Ellison’s mind, the “early Hemingway . . . chose to write the letter which sent [Jim] back into slavery. So that now he is a Huck full of regret and nostalgia, suffering a sense of guilt that fills even his noondays with nightmares, and against which, like a terrified child avoiding the cracks in the sidewalk, he seeks protection through the compulsive minor rituals of his prose.” As Ellison saw it, Hemingway disregarded the novel’s integral moral complexities; instead he privileged his own vision and sense of Twain’s stylistic importance while paying little heed to the tensions of race in America that Twain tackled. Such “minor rituals” echo the thematic narrowness Ellison saw in Hemingway, as well as reveal a note of competitiveness. As we have seen in his unpublished essay and National Book Award speech, Hemingway’s search for artistic “protection” eschewed moral challenges for a sound but limited style. That “Hemingway missed completely the structural, symbolic and moral necessity for that part of the plot in which the boys rescue Jim” was a disservice to the novel for Ellison, for whom Huck’s rescue of Jim was not a copout but “moral necessity.”

Ellison seemed to see what Fishkin argues throughout *Was Huck Black*?—that “African American voices shaped Twain’s creative imagination at its core,” and that Huck’s struggles in freeing Jim were not afterthoughts but a necessary moral dilemma.

Ellison articulates an autonomous, complex humanity in Jim that Hemingway did not; for the former, he was “Jim,” for the latter he was either “Nigger Jim” or “Jim, the nigger.” To Ellison’s mind, Jim, although imperfect, is human—ignorant and superstitious, good and bad, a “sensibly focused process of opposites.” As Twain paints him, Jim is a loving father and husband, a father figure to Huck, folksy and superstitious (evidenced, e.g., by his sense of being destined for wealth, in chapters 8 and 43), and somewhat ignorant (perhaps seen in his wondering why the French do not speak English, in chapter 14). Ellison praises what Hemingway missed: namely, “Twain’s efforts to focus the reader’s attention on Jim’s humanity”—and, we should add, on Huck’s efforts to “steal” Jim. Arguably, another of his “good traits” is his exacting revenge against the
duke and king in chapter 33. After he is re-enslaved on Phelps Plantation, Jim tells Silas Phelps and Mr. Burton of the duke and king’s con-artistry, which gets them tarred, feathered, and carried out of town. Although he does not mention this directly in “Twentieth-Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity,” Ellison may have seen Jim’s clever and effective stroke of revenge as evidence of his humanity, or at least as counter-weight to his seeming ignorance. Jim has an emotional and psychological life that ran counter to the limited black characters Ellison saw in Hemingway and Steinbeck. As Foley posits of the earlier version of the essay, “in 1946 he viewed Hemingway as Exhibit A of American literary racism.” Although Ellison would temper the tone of his comments in the 1953 version, and although he would continue to embrace Hemingway as a literary example, he took issue with his readings and characterization of black figures in American fiction. The tone may have been muted, but the rhetorical thrust was not.

Ellison continued his one-sided intellectual sparring with Hemingway in “Society, Morality and the Novel” (1957). Hemingway’s reading of Twain, Ellison wrote, was “a statement by reduction which . . . has helped us to ignore what seems to me to be the very heart of Huckleberry Finn.” Ellison was even harsher in a typed draft of this essay:

But what strikes me as interesting is the fact that usually the critics make their reductions [on?] aesthetic grounds but as it turns out, what they would discard is usually the moral heart of the fiction. Hemingway in order to create his own point of view had to cut the heart out of Huckleberry Finn. When he tells us that Twain should have stopped at the part when Jim is stolen from Tom and Huck he reveals that Twain’s moral preoccupations were meaningless to him.

The shift from “cut . . . out of” in this draft to “ignore” is consistent with Foley’s study of Ellison’s early writings and papers, in particular the working versions of “Twentieth-Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity”: “His notes and drafts indicate . . . that he originally intended to pose a still sharper critique of the role of modern literature in promoting and sustaining racial inequality,” seen for instance in his sense of modern American writers as almost vampiric and as perpetuating a literary Jim Crowism, in one of the essay’s many draft stages.

Although Twain’s moral explorations were apparently “meaningless” for Hemingway, they were quite meaningful for Ellison, who had praised Twain in his National Book Award address and expanded his consider-
ations of race in his own work. Part of Ellison’s “own point of view” saw “the moral heart” of the novel. Ellison was aware that “Twain [had] interrogated his culture’s categories and conventions of what it meant to be ‘black’ or ‘white,’” despite the novel’s controversy and perceived (and possibly racist) ambivalence toward Jim.\textsuperscript{112}

His own “great influence on American fiction” notwithstanding, “Hemingway found it necessary to reduce the meaning of \textit{Huckleberry Finn} to the proportions of his own philosophical position.” In Ellison’s view, this racially myopic reading of the ending “reveals either a blindness to the moral point of the novel or [Hemingway’s] own inability to believe in the moral necessity which makes Huck know that he must at least make the attempt to get Jim free—to ‘steal’ him free is the term by which Twain reveals Huck’s full awareness of the ambiguousness of his position.” What for Hemingway was the novel’s “cheating” was for Ellison its moral crux, “the formal externalization of Huck–Twain’s moral position.”\textsuperscript{113} As Ellison had read it in “Twentieth-Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity,” Huck’s attempt to “steal” Jim from the Phelpses shows Twain wrestling with the moral vagaries of nineteenth-century America and accepting a degree of “personal responsibility for the condition of society.”\textsuperscript{114} Huck works against the society that enslaves Jim and that segment of society, represented by Tom, that limits Jim’s freedom. Tom knows Miss Watson has freed Jim in her will, but he protracts and romanticizes the rescue of a free man—partly to one-up Huck’s experiences that preceded their reunion at the Phelpses, partly to assert his superiority to Jim and Huck. After informing the reader of Jim’s emancipation at the beginning of the last chapter, Huck tacitly rejects what Tom represents when he chooses “to light out.” The “ambiguousness of his position” that Ellison sees rests in Huck’s use of “steal” and in the haziness in why he rescues Jim—as his friend, as a slave, as a gesture of nascent abolitionism, or as some of each. Whether Huck was saving his friend or making a broader antislavery statement, his actions embody the moral “responsibility” that Ellison found in Twain but found wanting in Hemingway. In terms of artistry, Hemingway was always a key exemplar for Ellison the novelist; in terms of racial portraiture and social awareness, Hemingway was an anti-exemplar for Ellison the morally aware critic.

Clearly Ellison’s critical voice and mind-set had matured since his early unpublished essay, which assesses Hemingway more positively, albeit in embryonic Marxian terms. Both “Twentieth-Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity” and “Society, Morality and the Novel” take an intellectual qua moral stand. These essays show Ellison seeking a bal-
ance between Hemingway’s impact, his apparent jettisoning of Twain’s moral vision, and Ellison’s broader respect. Ultimately more disappointed in than angered by Hemingway’s comments, Ellison must have thought that a writer of his stature would not have missed Twain’s overarching moral message. Here he performs a kind of intellectual signifying vis-à-vis Hemingway’s opinion of Twain: he reads Hemingway’s words, quotes them in his essay, and then uses them to articulate his own position while dismissing Hemingway’s. As Fishkin maintains, “Twain helped open American literature to the multicultural polyphony that is its birthright and special strength. He appreciated the creative vitality of African American voices and exploited their potential in his art.” Ellison valued Twain’s moral awareness, that he “allowed African American voices to play a major role in the creation of his art,” rather than relegating them to the peripheries of his fictional world as some of Twain’s contemporaries and heirs had done.115

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn counterbalanced Ellison’s respect for Hemingway and disappointment in his limits and silences, although “Hemingway’s art justifies what he made of Twain’s,” as Ellison wrote of his imperfect ancestor in “Society, Morality and the Novel.”116 For him, Hemingway had “ignored the dramatic and symbolic possibilities” of race in the American milieu; in the same essay, he praised Twain and Faulkner for not ignoring race.117 Had he read this essay, Hemingway would probably have chafed at the unfavorable comparison to these writers—particularly Faulkner, his staunch rival—since he wanted to feel superior to the literary field. Beyond privileging Twain and Faulkner where race and morality were concerned, Ellison “acknowledged publicly a major failing in Hemingway”: his “evasion of responsibility concerning race” in his own work, in which Ellison found few, if any, fully drawn black characters.118

IN CONCERT with Hemingway’s reading of Twain, his racial portraiture was also a cause of concern for Ellison—an intellectual casus belli that enabled him to riff on Hemingway, recover Twain’s moral vision, and advance the “growing intellectual autonomy” he sought from his predecessors and coevals.119 Ellison coupled his drive for creative independence and his desire for racial diversity in American fiction in New York in July 1955, when he participated in an intellectual discussion sponsored by the American Scholar. In a session entitled “What’s Wrong with the American Novel” (significantly a statement, not a question), Ellison joined William Styron and Albert Erskine, among others. Discussing the shortcomings of
some modern American writing, Ellison pitted Hemingway against another ancestor, Melville, who “could . . . get in all the racial and social and cultural types, too; all the diverse peoples.” Yet, “Hemingway wrote for years and years, and wrote well, I think, and so what? How many of our diverse peoples could really move into his early work? Well, the Hemingway point is this: that here was a concentration mainly on technique.” For Ellison, this narrowness led to a “statement of disillusionment given style” but not an effective consideration of race and “our diverse peoples.”

His great respect for Hemingway notwithstanding, Ellison thought his work lacked genuine black humanity and echoed how “our twentieth-century writers were bombarded by change and they restricted their range. Where Balzac took on a whole society, they settled for a segment.” This, for Ellison, downplayed the importance of racial politics and discourses to American literature, a charge he had also levied in his National Book Award address when he spoke of the American writer’s responsibility to encompass “our variety of racial and national traditions, idioms and manners.”

Certainly *Invisible Man* and Ellison’s essays fulfilled this self-appointed responsibility, as did the work of Melville and Twain. However, Ellison felt that Hemingway’s work lacked such “variety,” despite its stylistic value.

In an undated draft of “Twentieth-Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity,” Ellison listed “The Battler,” “The Killers,” and *To Have and Have Not* as works whose dramatis personae are almost exclusively white, with “only a handful of Negro characters.” Ellison did not explicitly incorporate his readings of these texts into his essays. Yet he likely felt that none of Hemingway’s few black characters embodied “the full, complex ambiguity of the human” he valued in Twain and whose absence he criticized in Hemingway. In this sense, we can read these Hemingway texts through an Ellisonian lens to assess how their treatments of race square with Ellison’s ideas and with how he felt “Hemingway’s stories . . . failed to explore deeply the nature of man.”

In “The Battler” (1925), a young Nick Adams—in many respects Hemingway’s literary alter ego—is exploring the Michigan wilderness; after getting thrown off a train he had hopped, he walks the tracks and then happens upon a camp. He first meets the retired, mentally unstable boxer Ad Francis and shortly thereafter Ad’s companion Bugs. As the story’s only black character, Bugs is not especially weak or strong. He cooks ham and eggs for all of them, protects Nick when Ad readies to hit him, cares for Ad after knocking him out, and sees Nick off warmly, if deferentially, at story’s end. Yet he lacks psychological depth and complex
humanity, insofar as much of his role depends on others—he accompanies and supports Ad, and he encourages and feeds Nick. He is clearly marked by his race and difference from Nick and Ad, alternately described by the narrator as “Bugs” (eleven times), “the negro” (twenty-one), and “nigger” (three). His race is largely unimportant to the basic plot, yet his otherness overshadows any semblance of interiority or humanity.

Although Hemingway does not specify the fullness of “Nick’s emotional, psychological, or moral development,” George Monteiro posits, “the reader is expected to acknowledge that some change has either occurred or, more likely, is occurring” in Nick. The older, slightly worldlier Nick of “The Battler” is not the boy who, at the end of “Indian Camp” (1925), “felt quite sure that he would never die.” Rather Nick sees that traveling on his own can entail struggle, even violence—he is thrown off the train by “[t]hat lousy crut of a brakeman” at the beginning of the story, and he nearly “get[s] [his] can knocked off” by a volatile former boxer and ex-con. An ex-con himself who met Ad in prison, Bugs is helpful and even downs Ad when the latter threatens Nick. Yet Bugs is somewhat subservient as he speaks “in a low, smooth, polite nigger voice” as “Mister Adams” leaves the camp; “[h]e’s got a lot coming to him,” Bugs had said to Ad earlier. This indeed suggests that “some change . . . is occurring.” What this change entails—perhaps a sharper awareness of race and interracial relations, among other things—is left uncertain at story’s end.

Nick Adams is featured in another story with a black character, “The Killers.” Again on his own in rural Michigan, Nick encounters more violence, this time of a more serious, criminal nature. As Nick is eating in a quiet luncheonette in Summit, Michigan, two brusque men walk in. The hit men (Al and Max) await Ole Andreson, a boxer who apparently crossed some criminals in Chicago; in the meantime, they hold Nick, the owner George, and the cook Sam at gunpoint. As with Bugs, the narrator sometimes refers to Sam only by his name (twice), but other times by his race or role: “the cook” (eight times), “Sam, the cook” (two), “Sam, the nigger” (one). Before we know his name, we learn from George that Sam is “[t]he nigger that cooks.” He is described as “nigger” a total of eleven times—once by the narrator, twice by George, and eight times by Al. Based on his index of complex racial portraiture, Ellison may have been bothered that the reader learns nothing about Sam save that he is a cook who does not want to get involved with protecting Ole from his would-be “killers” after they leave. “You better not have anything to do with it at all,” Sam tells Nick after Al and Max leave, “[y]ou better stay way out of it.”
Sam could be innately noncombative, or he could have some past grudge with Ole, or he could be emotionally raw by what just happened (and justifiably so). We never find out definitively, because Sam lacks psychological depth and is marginally important to the narrative. His final words to Nick—“Little boys always know what they want to do”—go unheeded, because Nick heads for Ole’s rooming house shortly after Al and Max leave, and we see and learn nothing more of Sam.¹³²

Both Bugs and Sam are, potentially to Ellison’s dismay, somewhat subservient to the (white) characters around them. Each cooks ham and eggs for others, and each experiences conflict: Ad’s threatened attack against Nick (which Bugs stops by hitting Ad with a blackjack) and the hit men’s captivity of Nick, George, and Sam himself while awaiting Ole Anderson. Both black men, as Amy Strong observes, are involved in intra-racial violence: “Bugs intervenes in the white-white conflict in order to preserve peace between [Ad and Nick],” and Sam “best embodies the attitude toward whites in conflict” by trying to stay away from the conflict between the killers and Ole, perhaps fearing that he himself would become the object of two armed whites’ interracial violence.¹³³ “Any threat of violence,” Strong continues, “always has the immediate potential to spill over into racial violence,” showing that “the conflicts are nevertheless structured and informed by anxieties about racial issues.”¹³⁴ While Hemingway perhaps hints at Sam’s “anxieties” in relation to Al and Max, Sam is present in the story but not especially deep. Both Sam and Bugs have little, if any, interiority and autonomy—their roles largely depend on others, and they seemingly lack an interior psychological life, the “wholeness” Ellison called for in the introduction to Shadow and Act and epitomized through Invisible. For Ellison, Hemingway’s stylistic understatement and narrative tension revealed a regrettable flatness in his treatment of black humanity, symptomatic of what he noted in “Twentieth-Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity” as modern literature’s evasion of social issues.

Judging by his standards for black characterization and passing mention of the novel’s few black personages in a draft of “Twentieth-Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity,” Ellison could have become tepid about To Have and Have Not. Hemingway’s novel symbolizes a tension between Ellison’s younger, quasi-Marxist self (who praised the novel in his unpublished essay) and the mature, racially aware novelist and critic. In fact, Ellison was so eager to read the novel when it came out that he “splurged” on the book during a time of family and financial crisis in the fall of 1937, when he was living in Ohio after his mother’s death; “he considered himself an intellectual” with the “priorities” of a nascent liter-
ary man. Ellison read the novel rather quickly but “wished for more substance” and lamented that it “did not sustain rereadings.” In this case, Ellison’s later quest for black humanity probably would have trumped his earlier fledgling Marxism, given how consistently he valued, sought, and created complex black characters in his mature career. Ellison’s calls in his National Book Award address and *American Scholar* discussion for diverse, deep characters may have been in part a reaction to the flat, limited black characters in Hemingway’s novel. *To Have and Have Not* is seemingly a type of limited “hard-boiled novel” that Ellison mentioned in his speech while tracing what he saw as *Invisible Man*’s superior literary and moral trajectory.

*To Have and Have Not* presents several black figures: a hit man who helps a white man kill three Cubans in Havana; a freelance crewman on Harry Morgan’s boat; a photographed corpse (the photo sent to Harry by some Cuban gangsters as a warning); Wesley, who helps Harry’s rum-running; a “wench” whom Harry once slept with; and a Key West bartender. Hemingway does not differentiate African Americans (Wesley and the bartender) from men who seem to be Afro-Cubans (the hit man, Harry’s boatman, and the corpse). Instead they are all seen—by Harry, his wife Marie, and the third-person narrator—as common in their race, all described as “nigger” or “negro,” and all except Wesley unnamed. To be clear, I do not mean to suggest that Hemingway shared Harry’s views of race—they may, indeed, be part of “the concrete, matter-of-fact vision appropriate to a naturalistic novel” of the era and Jim Crow South (for the Key West material, anyway). Nevertheless, I do want to examine the author’s portrayal of these characters, which backs Ellison’s assertion that Hemingway’s work lacked multivalent black humanity. Like Twain’s Mississippi River and Melville’s Atlantic and Pacific, Hemingway’s Gulf Stream was “a place of Atlantic intercultural interaction between ethnic and racial groups joined in a community of water” where one typically sees interracial interaction and cross-perception. *To Have and Have Not* is somewhat racially diverse, but a racial hierarchy undergirds its American, Cuban, and Gulf Stream social frameworks, as well as its narrative points of view.

Iterations of “nigger” abound in the novel’s narration and dialogue, largely due to Harry’s gritty, xenophobic outlook, or what Mark Ott calls his “racism, cruelty, and selfishness.” As in the above stories, the novel’s black characters are flat and subservient to whites. True to its “hard-boiled” tenor, the novel’s racial map is harsher than that of the stories. Harry, the narrator of part 1, refers to the hit man as a “nigger” (eight
times in three pages); the hit man never reappears or speaks, nor do we learn anything of him (even his name), save that he handles himself well in the shootout.\textsuperscript{141} The novel’s second black character arrives later in part 1, when Harry describes his crewman’s arrival for a chartered fishing trip:

He’s a real black nigger, smart and gloomy, with blue voodoo beads around his neck under his shirt, and an old straw hat. What he liked to do on board was sleep and read the papers. But he put on a nice bait and he was fast. . . .

[Mr. Johnson had] been giving the nigger a dollar a day and the nigger had been on a rumba every night. I could see him getting sleepy already.

Both Harry and Johnson speak of the crewman as a “nigger,” after Johnson wonders why he is hired to bait hooks.\textsuperscript{142} Later, while pursuing a fish, a life of debauchery and satisfactory labor are suggested for the crewman: “Every once in a while the nigger would doze off and I was watching him, too. I bet he had some nights.”\textsuperscript{143} After the day’s trip is done, Harry watches him leave: “The nigger . . . goes without saying good-by. He was a nigger that never thought much of any of us”—nor, we should add, does Harry seem to think much of him in return. As well, he only speaks twice in the scene: “What’s this for?” after Johnson tips him and “Don’t come tomorrow?” after Harry tells him of the trip’s end.\textsuperscript{144} We learn little about him: he baits hooks and drives well, has a proclivity for drinking and dancing, likes to sleep or read on the boat, and apparently returns Harry’s contempt with his own.

Hemingway possibly alludes to this same crewman at the end of the book. After Harry has died, his widow Marie reminisces: “I remember that time he took me over to Havana when he was making such good money and we were walking in the park and a nigger said something to me and Harry smacked him, and picked up his straw hat that fell off, and sailed it about half a block and a taxi ran over it. I laughed so it made my belly ache.”\textsuperscript{145} Whether this man is the same crewman or another Afro-Cuban, he is nonetheless oversimplified as an unnamed target of Harry and Marie’s racism who does not speak directly (only saying “something” that presumably offended Marie and angered Harry). Whereas, in The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Jim’s voice underscores the “emotions” and “very human pain” that Ellison valued, this Afro-Cuban man’s silence gives little emotion and humanity.\textsuperscript{146} We do not even see how, if at all, he reacted to Harry’s actions. As a potential reason the crewman disdained
Harry, this incident sharply marks Marie’s “urgency to establish difference” between the empowered Harry and the othered man. This scene can be said to suggest the black male–white female–white male dynamic of sexuality and violence seen in works by Faulkner (e.g., *Light in August*, 1932), Wright (e.g., *Uncle Tom’s Children*, 1938, 1940), and many others, although the violence here does not escalate to castration or lynching.

Marie’s memory of Harry’s protecting her squares with the description of the crewman in part 1, even if Hemingway is writing about two discrete and *different* men. Both wear a straw hat and are nameless, flat, and subjected to Harry’s racism—either through physical violence or verbal scorn.

Likewise, Wesley meets with Harry’s coarseness in part 2, after some Cubans have shot both men during a botched rumrunning mission. Although part two is told in third person, we still see some of Harry’s thoughts about Wesley. He is called “nigger” at least forty-seven times in three consecutive chapters (about twenty pages total)—primarily by the narrator, but twice by Harry: “Hell . . . ain’t no nigger any good when he’s shot. You’re a all right nigger, Wesley,” to which he does not reply. The difference here is that Harry refers to Wesley by his name and that Wesley speaks much more than the crewman discussed above, perhaps giving him more of an identity but still contrasting him with Harry. Diverging from Hemingway’s code of manhood, Wesley speaks too much for Harry, who belittles his talking about his gunshot wound while he himself has been shot in the arm. Contrastingly, Harry ignores the greater pain of his wound and uses his good arm to steer the boat, drop anchor, tend to both of their wounds, and dispose of the contraband rum before they reach Key West. In contrast, Wesley “blubber[s]” unstoically and does not help Harry while he nurses his leg wound. In further contrast,

“You ain’t going to fix me up,” the nigger said. The man, whose name was Harry Morgan, said nothing because he liked the nigger and there was nothing to do now but hit him, and he couldn’t hit him. The nigger kept on talking. . . .

He was getting on the man’s nerves now and the man was becoming tired of hearing him talk.

Whereas Harry typifies the Hemingway code hero in his reserved speech, Wesley “kept on talking.” Moreover, Wesley is a “nigger” and Harry is “a man”—they are of different races, but only Wesley is referred to by his race. For Ott, the “aggressive”—white?—“masculinity of Harry Morgan has its roots in the doctrine of the strenuous life,” which one also sees in
Hemingway’s active, overtly masculine persona. To Harry’s mind, Wesley lacks the masculine vitality and stoicism requisite for their Gulf Stream rumrunning. As Carlos Baker has shown, Harry’s involvement in rumrunning “underscores [his] capacity for stoic endurance”; Wesley’s undignified complaining counterpoints the more admirable Harry’s emotional reserve.

Although the portrayals of the Afro-Cuban crewman and Wesley complement Harry’s contemptuous view of virtually everyone he encounters, Harry others them by virtue of race, work ethic, and their failure to match his masculine code. So too is the Key West bartender who serves Richard Gordon and a handful of war veterans in chapter 22 othered—this “white-jacketed, big-bellied nigger bartender” or “big boogie” has, like Bugs and Sam, a fixed, servile role. The “Negro” bartender’s self-control contrasts Richard’s and the veterans’ aggressive drunkenness, yet he does little but serve drinks, speaks only once, and reveals no significant interior life. Largely silent like the crewman and Harry’s “wench,” the bartender says only “Yes sir. . . . Plenty of times. But you never see me fight nobody” when one of the drunken veterans asks him if he has mopped up blood in the past. In Toni Morrison’s view, one only sees “claims to fully embodied humanity” in the novel’s white characters, hence the fact that “Hemingway’s work could be described as innocent of nineteenth-century ideological agenda,” which she and Ellison locate in Twain.

Seen through Ellison’s lens of black humanity, Bugs, Sam, and the black characters in To Have and Have Not were not “rounded” humans. For Ellison, Hemingway lacked the moral and racial awareness that Twain epitomized, instead presenting under-drawn, somewhat stereotypical characters. Although “The Battler” and “The Killers” are primarily about Nick Adams’s growth, and To Have and Have Not focuses on Harry Morgan, all three texts give a limited view of North American and Cuban life, one in which race, racial injustice, and the writer’s own sociopolitical viewpoint went largely unexplored. As Ellison read Hemingway, Steinbeck, and others, “these Negroes of fiction are counterfeits” made into literary stereotypes by “a process of institutionalized dehumanization.” They lack psychological substance; they are “Negro,” “cook,” and “nigger,” but we do not get a clear sense of the social discourses defining them in such racialized terms, nor do they possess (to borrow Morrison’s term) a “fully embodied humanity.”

Hemingway’s characterization and use of “nigger” differs from Twain’s. Jim hints at a rich humanity behind his demeanor, but Bugs, Sam, and the others are largely limited from doing so, instead acting in minor roles while always already an Other to the narrator and characters. Like-
wise, Twain’s use of “nigger” is true to the antebellum South and arguably used to contrast Jim’s humanity with its connotations. \(^{158}\) “Twain subverted and radically deconstructed the racial categories of his day” by complicating both the word’s usage and Jim’s nuanced depiction. \(^{159}\) In contrast, Hemingway’s use seems unnecessary, despite its aptness to Harry’s harsh worldview. Hemingway does not explore the social structure advocating the word in the novel or stories, nor does he touch on any potential racial injustice or interracial relationships—as, to some degree, Twain and Faulkner had done while both exploring and embodying Southern racial discourse. To Ellison’s mind, Hemingway had perhaps been “cheating” when he eschewed complex, racially diverse characters in his fiction, or when he misread Twain’s novel. The simplified black characters in certain Hemingway works complement Ellison’s view of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*: both showed Hemingway preferring style and understatement over morality and a thorough racial sensibility.

Such criticisms notwithstanding, Ellison’s admiration was secure, as was Hemingway’s continuing influence on him. He continued to admire and teach Hemingway throughout his life, \(^{160}\) and he collected works by and about him through the 1970s and 1980s, including stories about the bequeathal of Hemingway’s papers to the Kennedy Presidential Library. Ultimately Ellison defined and refined his own art’s moral framework without fully dismissing Hemingway, as the latter had done with his mentors and as Ellison had at some level done with Wright. Before and after *Invisible Man*, Ellison’s “artistic vision was growing in scope and originality” and he “began to conceive a literary horizon beyond Wright” and others while continually enhancing his performance as writer-intellectual. \(^{161}\) Ellison’s active intellectual dialectic with Hemingway enacted further influence: it informed his reading of the American canon and strengthened his own lineage to it, particularly concerning racial injustice, the portrayal of complex black humanity, and the writer’s moral responsibilities to confront these challenges. The parameters of Ellison’s work always encompassed Hemingway, while enabling Ellison to turn away from his apparent racial shortsightedness and advocate a literature of greater moral awareness.

**“Battling” and “Really Good” Writers**

“I’ve really been too busy battling with myself and this novel-of-mine-to-be to get much reading done. I’m going to whip the dam[n] thing but it [is] giving me a tough fight; it just looks as though every possible emotional
disturbance has to happen to me before I can finish a book”—so wrote Ellison to Albert Murray in June 1957, in the same decade that Hemingway was experiencing similar struggles. Both were “battling” with a host of works in progress: Ellison’s diffuse “novel-of-mine-to-be”—part of which became Three Days Before the Shooting . . . (2010)—never saw print in his lifetime. Hemingway’s unfinished works—the posthumous A Moveable Feast, Islands in the Stream, The Dangerous Summer, The Garden of Eden, and Under Kilimanjaro—were likewise sprawling and incomplete upon his death in 1961. He “was fighting with imaginary demons” and wrote somewhat manically but not productively. They may have been at different life stages and canonical strata, but Ellison and Hemingway both struggled with stifled creativity, structural disorganization, and emotional disarray after their prize-winning novels of 1952.

Curiously, yet poignantly, Hemingway’s speech to the American Writers Congress in 1937 portended some of the problems that he and Ellison would have in the 1950s and 1960s:

There is nothing more difficult to do, and because of the difficulty, the rewards . . . are usually very great. If the rewards come early, the writer is often ruined by them. If they come too late, he is probably embittered. Sometimes they only come after he is dead, and then they cannot bother him. But because of the difficulty of making true, lasting writing, a really good writer is always sure of eventual recognition.

When Ellison first heard Hemingway say this in New York, he must have hoped to create a lot of “true, lasting writing”—thanks in part to the literary friendships he had begun cultivating with Hughes, Locke, and Wright, and in part to his close, eager reading of Hemingway and other literary models. Early in his career, Ellison began tuning his critical voice, persona, and sensibility to Hemingway, while also attempting to make a self-determining name for himself. Still, Ellison’s own “rewards c[a]me early” with Invisible Man in 1952, but future creative rewards were elusive, as they were for Hemingway after The Old Man and the Sea and his Nobel Prize in the early 1950s. Like Hemingway, Ellison achieved such “eventual recognition,” but both struggled to reach the high standards they had set for themselves. Neither published a novel after 1952, and both were stifled by their respective types of celebrity: Hemingway’s was of a social nature, while Ellison’s was of an intellectual nature, with numerous honors, visiting professorships, lectures, and professional engagements, which exacerbated his creative struggles. For both, this challenge of balancing
private writing and public engagements slowly drained their creativity and self-editorial acuity. Yet Ellison was not ultimately “ruined by” the success of *Invisible Man*, despite the struggles and incompletion of his second novel. His numerous essays, lectures, speeches, and professorial work point toward a kind of success and productivity in his later life, although not in the way Ellison finally desired—which is to say, through a novel superior to *Invisible Man*.

Ellison struck the fine balance of being influenced by Hemingway without continuing to imitate him overtly or apishly. As he noted of Hemingway in 1964 at the Library of Congress, “it is the quality of his art which is primary. It is the art which allows the wars and revolutions which he knew, and the personal and social injustice which he suffered, to lay claims upon our attention, for it was through his art that they achieved their most enduring meaning”—“enduring” for American letters and Ellison himself. Hemingway, Ellison, and their literary peers all experienced what Ellison called a “struggle with that recalcitrant angel called Art.” Within this larger philosophical “struggle,” of course, there were smaller professional struggles between writers: Hemingway saw Faulkner, Dos Passos, Steinbeck and others as rivals he needed to outdo; Ellison was bristly with such contemporaries as Himes, Giovanni, and Baldwin. Both Hemingway and Ellison tried to wrest themselves from their own influences—including Anderson and Stein, and Wright and Hughes, respectively. Such literary rivalry may indeed be a rite of passage as the artist seeks an independent voice; it certainly drove Hemingway’s and Ellison’s individual creativity and professional self-esteem.

Ellison’s “struggle” with Hemingway was a bit different from the above conflicts. Whereas he disagreed with Hemingway regarding his general avoidance of race in his work, Ellison continued to admire Hemingway, read about him, and model parts of his literary life on him. This dialectic of conflict and respect underpinned Ellison’s mode of riffing on Hemingway, his way of knowing, appreciating, but reshaping the work and ideas of his “ancestor.” Out of Hemingway’s early literary influence on Ellison was born his lasting intellectual influence on him. And from this intellectual influence came Ellison’s intellectual combat and engagement with Hemingway, particularly concerning *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and the paucity of “rounded human” black characters in Hemingway’s fiction. Ellison embraced this connection to the “true father-as-artist” whom he greatly admired, yet from whose territory he lit out for one in which he reprised Twain’s moral vision, riffed on Hemingway’s, and continually improvised and improved his own.
Notes

1. Parts of this chapter were presented at the American Literature Association Conference (May 22, 2008) and at Georgetown University (October 6, 2008). My great thanks go, respectively, to the Ernest Hemingway Society (particularly Suzanne Del Gizzo and Jill Jividen Goff) and Georgetown’s Intellectual Life Committee (particularly Kelley Wickham-Crowley and Mimi Yiu) for the opportunity to present my work. Additionally, Gary Holcomb, Lisbeth Fuisz, Norma Tilden, and Patricia O’Connor have given valuable feedback at various stages of this project.

2. Ellison, Collected Essays, 186.


6. Ibid., 31.


8. Ellison, Collected Essays, 186–87. In fact, Ellison was twenty-four when he met Wright in New York in late June 1937—he was born March 1, 1913, although he claimed 1914 as his birth year throughout his life. Rampersad and Jackson discuss the importance of this shifted birth date vis-à-vis Ellison’s literary persona, particularly its place in his continual reshaping of his image, politics, intellectualism, and past.


12. Ibid., 146.


14. Foley, Wrestling with the Left, 74.


16. Ibid., 193.


18. Ibid., 170.


20. Ibid., 62; Jackson, Emergence, 172.


25. In “The Killers,” Max watches the luncheonette’s mirror for any customers as he and Al hold Nick Adams, George, and Sam at gunpoint. In “The Sea Change,” an unnamed man looks at himself dejectedly in the bar’s mirror after his girlfriend has left him for another woman. Throughout To Have and Have Not, Harry Morgan and Richard Gordon often look at themselves and other patrons in their respective bars’ mirrors.
30. Ibid., xix.
38. Fishkin, *Was Huck Black?*, 76.
39. Ibid., 139.
42. See, for example, Michael Reynolds’s five-volume biography of Hemingway (Norton, 1986–1999), as well as Scott Donaldson’s *By Force of Will* (Penguin, 1977) and *Hemingway vs. Fitzgerald* (Overlook, 1999).
47. Fishkin, *Was Huck Black?*, 135.
54. Ibid., 222–23.
56. Murray and Callahan, *Trading Twelves*, 223. “Mose,” Callahan reminds us in his introduction, is a racial figure: both “old Moses who ever seeks the promised land” and “the sly and cunning Negro trickster whose subservience is a mask” (xii). Ellison and Murray often spoke of “Mose” in their letters about American literature, culture, and society.
57. Jackson, *Emergence*, 260. I am very grateful to John Callahan for granting me permission to examine and quote from some of Ellison’s papers in the Library of Congress. I also wish to thank Alice Lotvin Birney and the Library of Congress Manuscript Division for their assistance when I worked with the Ralph Ellison Papers in April and July 2008. (NB: Like many writers, Ellison misspelled words in his notes and drafts. With Callahan’s permission, I have made a few silent corrections of Ellison’s spelling and grammar in his unpublished Hemingway essay—all minor, obvious errors such as “craftsmanship,” “preceptions,” and “violin.”)
58. It seems that Ellison undertook this piece some time after October 1938 but perhaps before October 1940. On the reverse of page 19, Ellison refers to “the preface of...
his most recent book” in which Hemingway discusses Dorothy in The Fifth Column; this collection, The Fifth Column and the First Forty-Nine Stories, was published on October 14, 1938. Ellison does not discuss For Whom the Bell Tolls, published on October 21, 1940. Since he greatly admired Hemingway’s work and later retyped parts of this novel, he likely would have discussed it in conjunction with previous stories and novels. Yet the essay became so thorough—it discusses twenty-four works—that Ellison simply may not have gotten to For Whom the Bell Tolls before abandoning the project.

59. Ellison, Unfinished essay, 2.
60. Maxwell, “‘Creative and Cultural Lag,’” 66; Foley, Wrestling with the Left, 33.
61. Ellison, Unfinished essay, 12.
63. Ellison, Unfinished essay, 12, 18.
64. Ibid., 11.
65. Ibid., 10.
67. Ellison, Unfinished essay, 11.
68. Ellison, Flying Home, xxv.
69. Hemingway, A Farewell to Arms, 224–25.
70. Rampersad, Ralph Ellison, 180–81.
72. Jackson, Emergence, 277.
75. Ibid., 11, 22.
76. Rampersad, Ralph Ellison, 109.
77. See, respectively, Mary Hemingway to Ralph and Fanny Ellison on February 7, 1967, and April 13, 1973 (Box 51, Ralph Ellison Papers, Library of Congress).
78. Rampersad, Ralph Ellison, 268.
80. Ellison, Collected Essays, 151–53.
81. Ibid., 151.
82. Ibid.
83. Ibid., 152.
84. Ibid., 152–53.
85. Faulkner had won the Nobel Prize in November 1950; he noted in his speech that “the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself” have been “forgotten.” See Faulkner’s Nobel Prize address in Essays, Speeches and Public Letters, ed. James B. Meriwether (New York: Random House, 1965), 119–21.
86. Hemingway, Green Hills of Africa, 22.
89. Ellison, Collected Essays, 152.
90. Ibid., 151.
91. Ibid., 153.
92. Porter, Jazz Country, 53.
93. Rampersad, Ralph Ellison, 275.
94. Baker, Modernism, 56.
95. Ellison, Conversations with Ralph Ellison, 4.
96. Hemingway, Green Hills of Africa, 22.

98. Hemingway, though, does not account for Tom Sawyer’s role in what Fishkin terms “Jim’s ornate captivity,” which embodies “the travesty that white America made of black freedom in the post-Reconstruction South.” Jim, moreover, is not “stolen from the boys” but from Huck, who learns in chapter 31 that the king sells Jim to Silas Phelps for forty dollars—the same amount Tom gives Jim in the last chapter, suggesting another parallel between the king and Tom. See Fishkin, *Was Huck Black?*, 84.

99. Ellison wrote but did not publish an early version of this essay in 1946; he revised and published the essay in *Confluence* (December 1953).

100. Ellison, *Collected Essays*, 82. Ellison does not comment on the African characters in *Green Hills of Africa*, “The Snows of Kilimanjaro,” and “The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber,” largely because he looked at race more provincially than globally and, as Rampersad put it, “saw himself (as Wright saw himself) as first and foremost a Western intellectual. A rejection of Europe was a step backward.” Moreover, “[b]lacks must accept the reality of America,” Ellison thought when the State Department asked him to visit Ghana in 1959; he was dismissive of others seeking a connection to Africa that he described to *Phylon* as “more fanciful than actual.” See Rampersad, *Ralph Ellison*, 300, 366.


102. Ibid., 95.

103. Ibid., 90.


108. Both of Ellison’s essays were published in Hemingway’s lifetime, but there is no evidence that Hemingway read either one. It seems likely that he did not, because he would probably have responded to Ellison’s remarks confrontationally, either directly to Ellison or indirectly in his own letters. Recently, Marc Dudley has examined what he terms a “racial cauldron” in a Hemingway story, with some discussion of Ellison. See “Killin’em with Kindness: ‘The Porter’ and Hemingway’s Racial Cauldron,” *The Hemingway Review* 29, no. 2 (Spring 2010): 28–45.


111. Foley, *Wrestling with the Left*, 106.


114. Ibid., 89.


117. Ibid., 86.


121. Ibid.


125. Monteiro, “‘This Is My Pal Bugs,’” 225.
127. Ibid., 129, 135.
128. Ibid., 138, 133.
131. Ibid., 286.
132. Ibid.
134. Ibid., 58.
137. Hemingway, *To Have and Have Not*, 113.
139. Ibid., ix.
140. Ibid., 73. One sees a similarly cruel outlook in Harry’s treatment of Mr. Sing and a group of Chinese refugees whom he agrees to ferry to Florida. He eventually double-crosses Mr. Sing, kills him, and abandons the refugees off the coast of Cuba. Mr. Sing and the others are, in Harry’s view, either “Chink[s]” or “Chinamen” who “talk in Chink” and smell foully. See Hemingway, *To Have and Have Not*, 57–60.
142. Ibid., 11.
143. Ibid., 14.
144. Ibid., 23.
145. Ibid., 258.
150. Hemingway, *To Have and Have Not*, 75.
151. Ibid., 69–70.
152. Ott, *A Sea of Change*, 82.
155. Ibid., 209.
158. This is the essence of David L. Smith’s argument in “Huck, Jim, and American Racial Discourse” (*Satire or Evasion?*, Duke 1992). For Smith, Jim countervails the traits and inferiorities of a “nigger” or “Negro” through his intelligence, subtle resistance to slavery, and emotional depth.
160. In an interview with Rampersad, one of Ellison’s former students at Bard College (where he was a visiting professor in the late 1950s) remembered that Ellison “seemed obsessed by Hemingway” when teaching *The Sun Also Rises*, which his collecting so much material about Hemingway also bears out. See Rampersad, *Ralph Ellison*, 360.
162. Murray and Callahan, Trading Twelves, 165.
163. Reynolds, Hemingway: The Final Years, 343.
164. Hemingway, “Fascism is a Lie,” 139.
165. Rampersad chronicles Ellison’s many visiting professorships and academic talks from 1945 to 1992, among them: Bard, Chicago, NYU, Princeton, North Carolina, Iowa, Rutgers, Harvard, Dartmouth, West Point, and Bennington. Ellison was also involved with the Kennedy Center, MLA, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, among many other professional and cultural organizations. Ellison used this active, continuous involvement in academia as a way of reshaping his public identity from Invisible Man until his death in 1994. Such extended public intellectualism may, to a degree, have compensated for his creative struggles with his unfinished second novel, as it led to a wealth of material: lectures, commencement addresses, and essays.
166. Ellison, Collected Essays, 189.
167. Ibid., 189–90.

Works Cited


