“The pen is mightier than the sword” this is what Ralph Ellison has proved through his essays in *Shadow and Act* (1964) and *Going to Territory* (1986) all anthologized in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison* (1995). Ellison, as an essayist, has done a marvelous job and painted the picture of American ideology, the common African American’s trauma in terms of race and his faith in the American dream, by giving sensory details. His essays make a way into one’s heart and permeate his thinking to judge a case using facts and logic. To reach directly to the readers, Ellison follows American music, blues, folklore and autobiographical details. Like his successful novel *Invisible Man*, Ellison’s essays too place him as a rare artist in criticism. Richard Kostelanetz in his review on “Ellison’s Essays” speaks that in his essays:

> We get a more extensive, direct look at Ellison’s mind, and he emerges as clearly one of the most intelligent and wise authors of our time. Widely and deeply educated, very observant, aloof from past assumptions, capable of using ideas without becoming their victim, he is able to perceive and explain the paradoxes of the American experience and the Negro’s relation to it, ready to debunk any theories whose explanations are demonstrably false, and unwilling to let any biases get in the way of his perception of reality or his mission to write novels. (171).

*The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ably edited by John F. Callahan, includes the entire contents of *Shadow and Act* (1964) and *Going to the Territory* (1986), as well as 20 other pieces. *The Collected Essays* includes about half of the 75 occasional pieces and Addresses which Ellison wrote between 1937 and his death in 1994.
The *Shadow and Act* often considered as autobiographical in content and noted for its lucidity and insights into *Invisible Man* has an introduction and three divisions: "The Seer and the Seen," which deals with literature and Ellison's literary career; "Sound and the Mainstream," which deals with music and musicians; and "The Shadow and the Act," which concerns itself with racial issues. Each article has the original date of production at its end, allowing the reader to chart Ellison's development as a writer from 1942, the date of the earliest piece, to 1964.

In "The Seer and the Seen," Ellison uses literature as a vehicle for discussing the social consciousness of African Americans. He contends that whites assume that because African Americans have been brutalized in America they have become brutes and are unable to rise above this condition in life or in art. It is this vision that produces what Ellison calls "ideological" writing. African Americans, according to Ellison, have been able to turn aside racial provocation and to master and control pain. In short, African Americans have been able, through discipline, to transcend the negative environment spiritually and artistically. They contribute to the national growth on all levels.

The second section of the book is a variation of the first, but instead of using literature as a springboard for his discussion, Ellison uses jazz. Originating in the African American community, jazz has been associated with poverty and low life, but Ellison contends that like the African American experience, the artists and the art forms have transcended the limitations of the environment to triumph nationally.

The third section is a bit more caustic. Here Ellison examines the effects of racism on African Americans and concludes that not only has it affected the population adversely, causing mental and emotional problems, but that during World War II it was responsible for the death of African Americans. The essays, coming as they did when America was experiencing a great deal of racial turbulence, must have had a sobering
effect on the mainstream. Without the African American experience in America, America would have been otherwise what Ellison calls, “The nation could not survive being deprived of their presence because, by the irony implicit in the dynamics of American democracy, they symbolize both its most stringent testing and the possibility of its greatest human freedom (Collected Essays 588).

John Callahan points out “For Ellison, writing is a password to freedom. His writer’s middle passage is a liberating examination of the fluid democratic experience wherein ‘the values, ideals, assumptions and memories of unique individuals and groups reach out across the divisions wrought by our national diversity and touch us all’” (Introduction to The Collected Essays, xviii).

The second collection Going to the Territory containing seventeen essays sketch the portrait of jazz musicians such as Charlie Christian and Charlie Parker, the writers Stephen Crane and Henry James, the artist Romare Bearden and President Lyndon Johnson. Ellison’s immense knowledge over the subject on literature, music, art and jazz is clearly indicated in these essays and assures for him a place amongst the greatest critics and essayists of all time. He analyzes the subversive quality of black laughter, the mythic underpinnings of his masterpiece Invisible Man, and the extent to which America’s national identity rests on the contributions of African Americans. Ellison makes use of ironic humor in the manner of Invisible Man to reflect on personal influences and pays tribute to such creative mentors as Richard Wright and Duke Ellington.

Shadow and Act brings out the essays which mirror the milieu in which Ellison’s life was shaped. In the words of John Callahan in Introduction to Collected Essays:
As many of his essays attest, Oklahoma offered Ellison a synthesizing principle for his life and art. His background and experience there with music, religion, politics, sports, and sundry odd jobs and occupations made it easier for him to keep to the high ground in that lower-case civil war of literature, culture, art, and politics carried by many of his contemporaries into the 1950s, 1960s, and beyond (xix).

Ellison’s book *Shadow and Act* comprises of his essays that examine the antecedents and in doing so, he illuminates the literature and culture of both African Americans and Americans. The title comes from T. S. Eliot’s poem *The Hollow Men* (1925) which alludes:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Between the idea} \\
\text{And the reality} \\
\text{Between the motion} \\
\text{And the act} \\
\text{Falls the shadow}
\end{align*}
\]

The essay gives a good look at the mind and the ideas of Ellison’s biography, who share his personal experience by citing his past life. Ellison speaks vividly about his hometown, music and the vernacular. Ellison recounts his discovery of literature, how he came to be a writer and also defines the complexities of identity of his people. Ellison’s poetic voice and musical background are wound on these essays. He is seen as a deep thinker. Ellison’s sharing works as a vehicle carrying moral and ethical truth. Ellison worries about the notion of American identity and considers the craft of fiction as discipline and vocation. Ellison says that his essays, “are an attempt to transform some of the themes, the problems, the enigmas, the contradiction of character and culture native
to my predicament, into what Andre Malraux has described as “conscious thought”

(*Collected Essays*, 56).

Ellison’s most of the essays were written in New York and Rome and render the insight of his consciousness and emergence as a writer. He remarks:

- At best they are an embodiment of a conscious attempt to confront, to peer into, the shadow of my past and to remind myself of the complex resources for imaginative creation which are my heritage. Consciousness and conscience are burdens imposed upon us by the American experiment. They are the American’s agony, but when he tries to live up to their demands they become his justification (*Collected Essays*, 59).

About the superiority of the essays in *Shadow and Act* over other books on black art and culture, Arnold Rampersad, Ralph Ellison’s biographer suggests in an interview with Amazon.com, “*Shadow and Act* continues to serve as a primer for younger black writers who are seriously interested in questions of literary craft and race in America” (Accessed, 24 December 2011).

Jazz which is broadly applied by Ellison was originally taken as a form of ‘low life’ and known as ‘jass’ supposedly New Orleans slang. It first became popular during the 1920s and acclaimed during the Harlem Renaissance as assertive, positive and upbeat form of art. Jazz is an outgrowth of other forms of music, including classical music and spirituals, and as such serves as an example of the way African-American culture draws on a blend of influences to create new artistic expressions.

To Ellison, jazz is an image of an ideal community in which an individual freely expresses his pain and grief and transcends it through it. Ellison’s essay, “The Charlie
Christian Story” shows his vision on American culture and reveals him as a jazz critic. As a jazz enthusiast himself, Ellison corrects certain mistaken notions about jazz and jazz musicians. Ellison asserts that when we learn the stylistic development of Charlie Christian, we realize our lack of knowledge about jazz and the origins of jazz styles. He argues:

We know much of jazz as entertainment, but a mere handful of clichés constitutes our knowledge of jazz as experience. Worse, it is this which is frequently taken for all there is, and we get the impression that jazz styles are created in some club on some particular occasion and there and then codified in some club according to the preconceptions of the jazz publicists in an atmosphere as grave and traditional, say, as that attending the deliberations of the Acadamie Francaise (Collected Essays, 269).

Ellison defines and tells about the importance of jazz in “The Charlie Christian Story”:

True jazz is an art of individual assertion within and against the group. Each true jazz moment…springs from a contest in which each artist challenges all the rest; each solo fight, or improvisation, represents…a definition of his identity as individual, as member of the collectivity and as a link in the chain of tradition. (Collected Essays, 267).

Thus Ellison sees jazz as a medium of expression and an endless improvisation upon traditional materials and the jazz artists must not lose it at the cost of commercial performance for drawing profits. Ellison bases his work on the jazz idiom to convey his themes. Its use is thematically and technically a powerful assertion in his writings.
Berndt Ostendorf points out in his essay, “Ralph Waldo Ellison: Anthropology, Modernism and Jazz,” in *New Essays* that the jazz works as a national style:

> For Ellison, Jazz represents a working out of an all American vernacular, a national style. In fact for him, all American culture, including baseball, is ‘jazz-shaped.’ Jazz is an example and chief exhibit for Ellison’s conception of a pluralist culture that, as opposed to bounded social and political systems of power, knows no frontiers, whether marked by color or genes” (96-97).

“*The World and the Jug*” is one of Ellison’s important essays on life. It speaks about the role of the African American writer and answers the major attacks by a Jewish writer Irving Howe’s essay “Black Boys and Native Sons,” published in *Dissent*. In the essay Howe adopted a strangely patronizing tone to celebrate Richard Wright’s authenticity and to reprimand James Baldwin and Ellison for failing to possess a similar sense of rage. Howe declared himself astonished by ”the apparent freedom [*Invisible Man*] displays from the ideological and emotional penalties suffered by Negroes in this country.”

“The World and the Jug” is probably Ellison’s richest apologia for his life as a writer who happened to be black, as well as for the Negro culture that had made him…as such, it also defends all American writing that seeks to move beyond ethnicity and toward national or universal values (Rampersad, 403).

Ellison's passionate reply to Howe's essay, “The World and the Jug,” can be read as a manifesto, a defense of his vision and art, and of the life that created them. Evidently Howe feels that unrelieved suffering is the only "real" Negro experience, and that the true
Negro writer must be ferocious. Ellison claims that there is also an American Negro
tradition which teaches one to deflect racial provocation and to master and contain pain. It
is a tradition which abhors as obscene any trading on one's own anguish for gain and
sympathy; which springs not from a desire to deny the harshness of existence but from a
will to deal with it as men at their best have always done. Ellison knows to deflect racial
provocation and answers Howe’s attack:

One unfamiliar with what Howe stands for would get the impression that
when he looks at a Negro he sees not a human being but an abstract
embodiment of living hell. He seems never to have considered that
American Negro life (and here he is encouraged by certain Negro
"spokesmen") is, for the Negro who must live it, not only a burden (and
not always that) but also a discipline” (Collected Essays, 159).

Arnold Rampersad suggests the title “The World and the Jug” alludes to the
German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer’s remark that in life, one must take the jug
with the water (Biography, 403). Ellison explains:

Howe seems to see segregation as an opaque steel jug with the Negroes
inside waiting for some black messiah to come along and blow the cork.
Wright is his hero and he sticks with him loyally. But if we were in a jug
it is transparent, not opaque, and one is allowed not only to see outside but
to read what is going on out there, and to make identifications as to values
and human quality (Collected Essays, 163-64).

In “‘The World and the Jug,’” Ellison explains that, concerning influence and
inspiration, Wright is his “‘relative” and other writers such as T. S. Eliot, Malraux,
Hemingway, and Faulkner are literary “ancestors.” His citation of various authors from diverse traditions and nations reflects Ellison’s awareness that, as an American writer, he is a blend of cultural influences, and the blend is a matter of choice and intention. As they are twentieth century American novelists, Twain and Hemingway are the most discussed “ancestors” in the text, and both are responsible for what is considered invention in their prose styles. Hemingway is the inventor of his precedent-setting style of short, lean, minimalist sentences, which objectively describe such topics as adventure and war. His prose and thematic material are responsible for the author’s public persona as a sportsman and adventurer; in effect, he invents himself, at least in the public eye, by depicting his particular, masculine view of the world. Interestingly, Ellison is as ambivalent about Hemingway as he is about Wright.

“Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke” is another well known rebuttal essay on Ellison’s view on Negro as a masking trickster. The essay originated in the exchange of a letter to Stanley Edgar Hyman, an old friend of Ellison. Hyman in his essay titled “The Negro Writer in America: An Exchange,” debated that the African American writers were the “darky entertainer” or the smart man playing dumb to fool the white. Ellison defended that the Negro’s masking in the American soil should not be misunderstood:

Archetypes, like taxes, seem doomed to be us always, and so with literature, one hopes; but between the two there must needs be the living human being in a specific texture of time, place and circumstance who must respond, make choices, achieve eloquence and create specific works of art. Thus I feel that Hyman’s fascination with folk tradition and the pleasure of archetype-hunting leads to a critical game that ignores the specificity of literary works (Collected Essays, 101).
Ellison being a stern critic rejects the role assigned to an African American as merely an entertainer or a ‘clown familiar to Negro variety-house audiences’ (101). Lawrence Jackson criticizes with the reference to Ellison’s change of birthday:

One less susceptible to the infamous rabbit punch of white America. It is a small way to slip the yoke of fixed, predetermined, racialized identity. But as a part of changing the joke, in other words turning the tragic of black life into a joke on white life, Ellison felt compelled to reject manifestations of tragedy in his own personal circumstance (*Cambridge Companion to Ralph Ellison*, 28).

Ellison argues that ‘Negro American writer is also an heir of the human experience which is literature’ more important than the folk tradition and claims that the artist’s greatest freedom lies in the irrespective of any culture or racial identity.

“Tell It Like It Is” is an essay Ellison wrote in Rome in 1956, but did not finish it until 1965. It describes an elaborate dream that fuses the death of Ellison’s father with the assassination of Abraham Lincoln into a meditation on the nightmarish quality of our history and the search for heroes. In the dream Ellison finds himself as a boy strolling on a spring morning, watching birds sing and the worms creep over here and there.

The worms were everywhere, the walk smeared green and white with their pulp and skin. But they were relentless. They kept dropping from the trees to the walk and moving over the curb and into the street in a steady wave, providing an ambulatory feast for the birds. Trying to avoid both worms and smears, I moved past the well-trimmed walks that led through handsome lawns to the distant houses, showing bright and gay with awnings (32).
As any piece of literary work is the creation of the writer, it probes consciously and intentionally his personal psychology. The writer expresses his desires, unfulfilled wishes and dreams, and nightmarish fears through his works. Ellison describes his dream in his essay, “Tell It Like It Is”. It was a brilliant day of spring morning and Ellison was enjoying it but he avoided both worms and smears and sees them as ‘relentless’ which anticipates his subtle fear of being victim of some unknown danger. Kenneth W. Warren studies the psychoanalyses his dream in his essay, “Chaos Not Quite Controlled: Ellison’s Uncompleted Transit to Juneteenth” as:

The mingling of disgust and anticipation plays out on a scene of degraded phallic images where it seems almost impossible for the boy to avoid participating in an avian orgy of castration – a series of attacks which are at this point rendered more sickening than sinister because the narrative at first emphasizes the “relentless” worms and not the voracious, consuming birds (Cambridge Companion to Ralph Ellison, 191).

In his dream Ellison encounters a familiar man with uncanny movements. The man turns out to be a racially ambiguous person “stranger wearing a dull black and gray diamond-checked suit, his face narrow as he watched m out of small, staring eyes” (33). The dream anticipates certain fears to Ellison. “Tell It Like It Is” reflects on what happens when an African American writes about desegregation. Ellison at the end of his essay declares, “So I confess defeat; it is too complex for me to “tell it like it is.” (46). Warren comments:

Ellison has constructed a complex dream vision into which he unfolds a variety of disparate elements that include autobiographical reminiscences…the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, snippets of
American intellectual history, and references to popular culture, all of which he leavens with Freudian symbolism (188).

“Hidden Name and Complex Fate” is an autobiographical essay. It was originally delivered as a lecture at the Library of Congress in 1964. Ellison analyses the mystery hidden behind his first and mid name being given as ‘Ralph Waldo’ by his father after the great poet and scholar Ralph Waldo Emerson. Ellison recalls, “During my early school years the name continues to puzzle me, for it constantly evoked in the faces of others some secret. It was as though I possessed some defect which was invisible to my own eyes and ears” (Collected Essays, 196). As Ellison grew up he soon felt the responsibility of bearing a great name and allegorized his going-to-be a writer. ‘Wherever it was necessary to learn something about Mr. Emerson and what he had written, such as the “Concord Hymns” and the essay “Self-Reliance,”’ and in following his advice (I) reduced the “Waldo” to a simple and, hoped, mysterious “W,” and in my own reading I avoided his works like the plague (197).

Ellison’s essays bear a personal tone and he reminiscences about Romare Bearden, who shared his views on relationship between art and living, ideas and complex details of consciousness and experiences. Ellison eulogizes about his painter friend Romare Bearden:

Knowledge made Romie Bearden such as affirmative figure in my own struggle to acquire writing skills. True, among my friends there was a world-famous writer, and another, with whom I held endless discussions of our mutual craft, who would soon be widely acclaimed, but Romie’s approach to art and his line of development seemed closer to my own (Collected Essays, 837).
Horace Porter in his review on “Jazz Beginnings: Ralph Ellison and Charlie Christian in Oklahoma City” points on Ellison’s personal note:

Whenever Ellison writes about his native Oklahoma, there is nostalgia in his personal recounting. It is as though we are witnesses standing at a significant archaeological site, watching him excavate the buried treasures of his past… Ellison’s memories of his boyhood and the influential individuals he knew in Oklahoma City, become for him a continuing source of inspiration and endless source of untold tales (285).

Ellison began playing the trumpet when he was eight. The blues singer Ida Cox and Ma and Rainey and jazz musicians such as Louis Armstrong, Charlie Christian, Duke Ellington, Lester Young and Charlie Parker deeply influenced Ellison’s developing artistic sensibility. Ellison’s boyhood period was charged with the atmosphere of these artists whom he highly admired. The people in his town enjoyed playing guitars, Jew’s harp, kazooos, yukes, saxophones and various other instruments. As such the music background worked as a catalyst to the understanding of music for Ellison and the same constituted the contents of his writings. In an interview “Ralph Ellison’s Territorial Vantage” with Ron Wellburn, Ellison reports:

And we recognized and were proud of our group’s own cultural style wherever we discerned it – in jazzmen and prizefighters, ballplayers and tap dancers; in gesture, inflection, intonation, timbre and phrasing…. We did not fully understand the cost of the style but recognized within it an affirmation of life beyond all question of our difficulties as Negroes (54).
“Living with Music” captures Ellison’s craze for music. In this essay, Ellison talks about Ma Rainey, Ida Cox and Clara Smith “who made regular appearances” in the town. The blues women were inspirations through whom Ellison learned how to play the trumpet exactly. Ellison says, “I knew exactly how I wanted my horn to sound” (231). Arnold Rampersad in *Ralph Ellison: A Biography* points out, “Carefully he crafted his essay around his standing belief in the fluidity of American culture. The spiritual, he argued genially, were not so remote from Beethoven or Bach, nor was Armstrong so removed from Brahms or Chopin, that one couldn’t love them all (318).

*Going to the Territory* gives detailed account of the artists such as Louis Armstrong, Charlie Christian, Duke Ellington, Lester Young and Charlie Parker. *Going to the Territory* often treated as extension of essays of *Shadow and Act* describes Ellison’s giving importance of one’s territory which he belongs to. To Ellison “territory is an ideal place- ever to be sought, ever to be missed, but always there” quotes John Callahan in *Collected Essays* (473). Ellison's Oklahoma boyhood and his aspiration to become a renaissance man give a lyrical rendering of the impulse of African Americans and other Americans to push toward the frontier and its promise of freedom. Ellison reminiscences:

Bessie Smith gave voice to this knowledge when she sang of “Goin’ to the Nation, Going to the Terr’tor’, “ and it is no accident that much of the symbolism of our folklore is rooted in the imagery of geography. The slaves had learned through the repetition of group experience that freedom was to be attained through geographical movement (*Collected Essays*, 605).

*Going to the Territory* begins with “The Little Man at Chehaw Station” one of the masterpieces among his essays. The essay reflects the cultural values and art imbibed
even in the very simple man. Ellison calls him the little man who is no one but a metaphor for those democratic ideals which are at times ignored. Ellison begins the essay with a reminiscence of a day as a music student at the Tuskegee Institute. He recalls his piano teacher, Miss Hazel Harrison’s riddle, “you must always play your best, even if it’s only in the waiting room at Chehaw Station, because in this country there’ll always be a little man hidden behind the stove” (494). Ellison, through this essay provides full meaning to the cultural implications of democracy. To quote James Seaton in his review on “Ellison the Essayist”:

Against both paleo-conservatives and contemporary radicals who agree in linking artistic greatness to social hierarchy, Ellison insists that a truly democratic culture spurs artists to attain the highest standards possible. The “little man at Chehaw Station” serves Ellison “as a metaphor for those individuals we sometimes meet whose refinement of sensibility is inadequately explained by family background, formal education, or social status” (Hudson Review, 500).

Ellison has a sharp eye. He understands the significance of the little man who moves by being unnoticed. He ponders over the question:

From behind what unlikely mask does he render his judgments? And by what magic of art can his most receptive attention, his grudging admiration, be excited? No idle questions these; like Shakespeare’s Hamlet, the little man has his pride and complexity. He values his personal uniqueness, cherishes his privacy, and clings to that sticky democratic anonymity which makes locating him an unending challenge (Collected Essays, 499).
In “Little Man” Ellison gives an account of the complete articulation required in the relation between change and continuity in aesthetic and ethical judgment. Ellison finds that the true artist is far from the barriers of class, religion, region, and race. He transcends himself, and rise above complexities and basks in the warmth of music and art. Ellison here also discusses the concept of the melting pot, and champions the ideology of democracy.

Ellison being a sharp, observant and good analyzer has ever defended the stereotype and typical image of an African American. He asserts that African Americans epitomize the tradition of self-invention, particularly with regard to musical expression. Ellison takes pride in his inheritance and the folk traditions and arts of African American origin. Ellison’s biographer Arnold Rampersad remarks, “his brave refusal of coarse, destructive forms of militancy, his eloquent embrace of a studied moderation, and his complex patriotism cost Ellison some potential admirers but also brought him rewards” (Biography,401).

Ellison's stand about the contributions African Americans have made to music as an American art, including the level of musicianship which the greatest exponents of jazz had attained, was the basis on which he judged the achievements of African Americans in other forms of artistic expression. It was also why he expected that the African American artists would find freedom within their restricted circumstances. He was critical of those who wanted to dignify jazz's rough beginnings. African Americans knew too much about the hypocrisy of respectability, and as a youth he himself had seen more nobility in socially marginalized musicians than he did in the professionals and businessmen he was urged to emulate. Ellison wanted to keep jazz's old sources, but at the same time he said
that the musicians he most admired were those who could jam in the roadhouses as well as read scores in the orchestra pits downtown.

Ellison in his works discusses a great deal about things like craft, skill, and technique. No amount of emotion or raw power substituted for proper training. African American artists had to earn the mastery, a favorite Ellison word that would let them extend any tradition they encountered. Ellison speaks of African American musicians as being like folk heroes, and their mastery as an example of how these artists could reclaim the debased images of folk culture, which meant something different to African Americans than what it did to whites.