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Works Cited

O'Meally, Robert G., and Harold Bloom. "ROBERT G. O'MEALLY ON "INVISIBLE MAN" AND THE BLUES." *Bloom's Notes: Invisible Man* (1996): 47-50. *Literary Reference Center*. EBSCO. Web. 1 Feb. 2011.

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Section: Critical Views

ROBERT G. O'MEALLY ON "INVISIBLE MAN" AND THE BLUES

[Here, O'Meally studies the influence of blues music on Invisible Man.]

Blues language and rhythms resound throughout Invisible Man. The novel begins and ends with reference to Louis Armstrong's blues. In the prologue, the narrator declares that, to compensate for his invisibility, he has strung his underground hole with 1369 light bulbs and, though he already owns one radio-phonograph, he wants four more in order to hear his favorite blues properly, in mock patriotic fashion, the narrator wants to eat his favorite dessert of vanilla ice cream (white) and sloe gin (red) while listening to Armstrong's plaintive blues, "What Did I Do To Be So Black and Blue?"

Armstrong's blues, improvised just a fraction behind and then ahead of the beat, seem to express something fundamental about the narrator's Afro-American sense of timing:

Invisibility, let me explain, gives one a slightly different sense of time, you're never quite on the beat. Sometimes you're ahead and sometimes behind. Instead of the swift and imperceptible flowing of time, you are aware of its nodes, those points where time stands still or from which it leaps ahead. And you slip into the breaks and look around. That's what you hear in Louis' music.

This lagging behind in time is in keeping with CPT (colored people's time), the old joke on "traditional" Afro-American lateness. The ability to slide artfully in and out of tempo, Ellison implies, also can be a weapon. The yokel of the prologue defeats the fast-footworking machine-timed boxer by simply stepping "inside of his opponent's sense of time."

In the prologue, Ellison indicates that by tuning into the most profound meanings of the blues one is put in touch with certain fundamental aspects of Afro-American history and culture. The Invisible Man stumbles awkwardly "in the spaces between the notes" of Armstrong's blues and "not only entered the music but descended, like Dante, into its depths." Deep between the beams of blues sound, he encounters a series of black folk forms: a spiritual, a folk story, a sermon, a blues-like moan. When he finally ascends from this strange "underworld of sound," he hears Louis Armstrong innocently state the theme of the novel, inquiring (in the words of the Fats Waller

song): "What did I do/To be so black/And blue?"

The blues resound through many scenes in the first chapters of the novel. At times they seep almost imperceptibly into the action and increase its resonance by capturing the mood of the narrator. After departing from Rabb Hall (a stronghold of Brer Rabbit?), where Dr. Bledsoe tells our hero he has two days to pack his things and leave the dream campus, the Invisible Man wanders blankly across the school lawn, his stomach feeling achy. The blues, trailing in the distance, offer notes of sympathy: "From somewhere across the quiet of the campus the sound of an old guitar-blues plucked from an out-of-tune piano drifted toward me like a lazy, shimmering wave, like the echoed whistle of a lonely train, and my head went over again, against a tree this time, and I could hear it splattering the flowering vines."

Jim Trueblood's blues also prove soothing. They give eloquent and cathartic expression to his absurd situation (pointed out by some critics as an oedipal as well as existential crisis). Living on a country road far away from the "beautiful college" in an "old log cabin with its chinks filled with chalk-white clay," he tells his story over and over until he nearly sings it. Before his disgrace (he impregnated both his wife and his daughter), the college people occasionally had invited Trueblood to sing in the chapel for the white guests. But having brought shame upon "the whole race" by his misdeeds, Trueblood is the target of the college leaders' sharp hatred. Nonetheless, Trueblood manages to face up to his outrageously "blue" situation. Even after his wife has slashed him in the head, renounced and abandoned him, as well as marshaled community sentiment against him, Trueblood collects his strength and continues on courageously. He identifies with "the boss quail bird": "Like a good man, what he gotta do, he do." He also recalls his own heritage rooted in spirituals and the blues. Recounting the situation, Trueblood's speech achieves a kind of blues cadence:

I thinks and thinks, until I thinks my brain go'n bust, 'bout how I'm guilty and how I ain't guilty. I don't eat nothin' and I don't drink nothin' and cain't sleep at night. Finally, one night, way early in the mornin', I looks up and sees the stars and I start singin'. I don't mean to, I didn't think 'bout it, just start singin'. I don't know what it was, some kinda church song, I guess. All I know is I ends up singin' the blues. I sings me some blues that night ain't never been sang before, and while I'm singin' them blues I makes up my mind that I ain't nobody but myself and ain't nothin' I can do but let whatever is gonna happen, happen.

In his solitude, after releasing "some kinda church song" that dissolves into a blues, the black sharecropper finds himself able to face his family and community with renewed strength. Somehow the blues provide just the vehicle for coming to terms with the twisted and painful details of Trueblood's situation; by expressing himself in this "near tragic, near lyric" form, he conquers his fearful guilt, in the presence of Norton, the white college trustee, the Invisible Man is "torn between humiliation and fascination" at the farmer's story. But our young and ambitious hero is more interested, at this juncture, in winning a tip from Norton than in learning about the strengths and mysteries of his culture.

--Robert G. O'Meally, *The Craft of Ralph Ellison*
(Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980),
pp. 85-87

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By Robert G. O'Meally

Robert G. O'Meally (b. 1948) is the director of African-American studies at Wesleyan University. He is the author of *Lady Day: The Many Faces of Billie Holliday* (1991) and *The Craft of Ralph Ellison* (1980), from which the following extract is taken.