

Three Viewpoints on Professor Robert O'Meally's "Blues for Huckleberry"*

with Jonathan Arac, Susan K. Harris, and David L. Smith

Jonathan Arac:

Huckleberry Finn is a great novel, and Bob O'Meally has written a great introduction to it. I don't see it all his way, but the joy and sorrow of his first-person experience of Twain's book sing a deep song. Its tersely pointed, thoughtfully feelingful prose pitches the reader's ears to hear Huck's and Twain's.

To show the bluesiness of the book, Bob doesn't need to quote any boring parts—and there are some. That's one reason the blues perspective is so good to frame Twain's book. The tradition of Western high-tone criticism from Aristotle to Coleridge to New Criticism and all the schoolrooms of America wants to show the unity of the book, and that means you have to make much of the parts you really wish you didn't have to read.

My attempt to get away from this, I called on a different old Greek, Longinus.¹ What he meant by the sublime was the moment that jumps off the page to blow you away and send you someplace else. It doesn't have to be hi-falutin. It can happen through silence, and through bare, simple words ("Let there be light, and there was light"). Twain gets there a few times, and that's what I think people really love. At least I do.

The book's energy moves discontinuously, not as a unity but through repetitions and variations. I wish Bob, who knows blues so much better than I do, had said more about the formal principles by which feelings move through blues, often by leaps, and often with a great yearning ache that reaches out into the silence after the music closes: "Don't your house look lonesome when your baby's packed up to leave."

Bob offers an expert's handle on blues to guide our way through thinking about Huck and Twain. For thinking about this book, I may like even better the briefer bit he quotes elsewhere from Ralph Ellison's essay on Wright's *Black Boy*: "As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically." This leaves out the laughter, but there may be even more that's still missing.

Two things I miss in *Huckleberry Finn* as blues art. Dismissing discussions about this kind of blues and that kind, Son House said there was just one kind: "Consisted between male and female." There's so much sex in blues, and so little in Huck. Thinking about *Huckleberry Finn* as blues almost turns me into Leslie Fiedler to protest: English novels are about marriage, and European novels about adultery, and the great American novels about the chaste love between males of differing race—but what's blues about that?

As a secular Jewish intellectual in G. W. Bush's new millennial America, I love it that *Huckleberry Finn* makes a joke of hell and the whole selfish melodrama of salvation.² But the very same Son House whose all-sex definition I just quoted spent years as a preacher. He included in the same concert where he gave that definition a performance of "John the Revelator." And if I had a hellhound on my trail, buried my body by the highway side so my old evil spirit could catch a greyhound bus and ride, I'd be Robert Johnson, but not Huck. Playing this string, it's Pap who's the bluester, which makes the book a flight from the blues.

David L. Smith:

First, I admire and wholly endorse Jonathan Arac's terse description of what Bob O'Meally's essay achieves as an introduction to a new edition of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Bob attunes the reader and thus makes audible the voices of Huck Finn and Mark Twain. I also share Jonathan's worries about the limitations of the blues as a metaphor for this novel—or more broadly, for America itself. This is a large question, and I'll return to it. Jonathan describes Bob's personal narrative about being a reader and teacher of the novel as a "deep song." As someone who spends a lot of time reading and thinking about Federico García-Lorca, I find this description especially compelling. It addresses the impulse that Bob shares with Ellison to focus on expressive gestures that embody the most fundamental and therefore universal of human emotions. Jonathan is taken with Bob's use of the blues to "frame" *Huckleberry Finn*, but in contrast to Bob's broad sympathy with this novel, Jonathan seems to relish it only for its moments of *duende*. Echoing what Jonathan says about Bob, I don't entirely agree with Jonathan, but I see his point.

Incidentally, I'm delighted that Jonathan invokes Son House, my personal favorite among the Delta bluesmen. House does indeed represent a distinctly different perspective from Huck. Jonathan focuses on House's claim that sex is the essence of the blues. What strikes me is that the music of Son House voices a thoroughly *adult* worldview. Sex is part of that, but so is the frank experience of death and grief. Other blues artists give us more of violence, wrath, lust, malice and other such malign tendencies. One of the most startling things about *Huckleberry Finn* is that Mark Twain decided to write this ambitious book about life on the Mississippi in the 1840s from the perspective of a pre-adolescent boy. Slavery, race relations, ritualized social violence,

and the pervasive skullduggery of countless hustlers and sociopaths are just a few of the very adult commonplaces that a boy could witness but not fully comprehend. How astonishing that Twain imposed such a limiting perspective upon himself and yet succeeded so brilliantly! Blues is an adult's music, and *Huckleberry Finn* is a boy's book.

Yet surprisingly, this book has many blues moments. After the dreadful Wilks episode, Huck flees back to the raft, thinking he's escaped the King and Duke; but then, he looks back and sees them rowing his way. He says: "So I wilted right down onto the planks, then, and give up; and it was all I could do to keep from crying." Robert Johnson and Son House would appreciate this line. Or at the end of Ch. 33, seeing these two miscreants tarred, feathered, and riding a rail, Huck muses: "Human beings *can* be awful cruel to one another." It reminds me of Mississippi John Hurt's "Stagolee" or of many songs by Lightnin' Hopkins. Or consider the end of Ch. 18 when Huck sees his friend Buck killed by the Shepherdsons. He says simply: "I cried a little when I was covering up Buck's face, for he was mighty good to me." Again, Son House or John Lee Hooker. Perhaps Bessie Smith. But then, there's Huck's apology at the end of Ch. 15. "It was fifteen minutes before I could work myself up to go and humble myself to a nigger—but I done it, and I warn't ever sorry for it afterwards, neither." Isn't this more like a moment out of country music than the blues? Or perhaps it requires Robert Cray—a singer of our own generation.

Like Jonathan, I'd like to see Bob address the blues aspects of this novel with more specificity. But I also wonder how hard we should press the blues as an all-embracing framework. Ellison and Murray are quintessential modernists, seeking the

principle of order that can unify the radical fragmentation and plurality of our world. But should we post-moderns embrace that agenda? Isn't better to see the blues as one of many frames that can illuminate this polyphonic novel? I'd like to nag Bob to address this possibility; and I suspect that Jonathan would concur, at least in the question.

Still, I do have deep disagreements with Jonathan, as I know from reading *Idol and Target*. I am not bored by the popularity of this book. I am not annoyed by its raggedness, either. Though my late colleague Michael D. Bell was correct to insist that the distinction between "novels" and "romances" does not hold up under logical scrutiny, I believe that there is something important that we must struggle to understand in what nineteenth-century writers meant by "romance." I think that *Huckleberry Finn* is more a romance than a novel and that the expectations that we have as readers of novels are not necessarily appropriate to romances. Perhaps the book is more about the world that Huck witnesses than it is about Huck himself. Perhaps if we desire a fuller development of Jim or Miss Watson, we are making assumptions inappropriate to the actual genre of this work. Perhaps the limited possibility within the world of this work is itself instructive. Perhaps the harmony of this work, with all its peculiar strains, has its own compelling beauty—a beauty that actually would not be enhanced if the book obeyed rules of character development and moral hierarchy that we as novel readers have come to presume as natural law.

Though my own view on these matters is doubtless clear, I do intend these as questions. This book forces the issue on how we read. Bob recognizes that forthrightly in his essay; and Jonathan and I, in ways that I take to be different but not entirely antagonistic, are responding to his response to Twain's challenge. Can it be that neither

the blues nor the novel is adequate to encompass the radical pluralism of American reality? That, I think, is the question I'd like to pose for both Bob and Jonathan. And finally, Jonathan's closing comment is a potent one. How about Pap Finn? Admittedly, he's outside the canonical paradigms of the blues. Then again, there's a lot of country music that would embrace his spirit and even his drunkenness, if not all the details of his infamous rants. But can we imagine this book without Pap? I'd argue that an adequate critical framework for this novel should make us equally adept at addressing both Pap and Jim. We may not like Pap, but we don't have America if his voice is absent. Perhaps the most constructive way to conclude is simply to ask this question. What does a blues-inflected reading tell us about the presence of Pap Finn?

Susan K. Harris:

I think it's significant that Bob begins his essay by reviewing his personal history, not only with the text, but also with its critical history. I suspect that, like many of us, that's because he hasn't yet come to grips with it all. The critical history of *Huckleberry Finn*, especially for those of us educated in the 1960s, maps a series of U.S. scholars yearning for "good news"—for a text in which the fraught terrain of U.S. racial relations moves towards resolution and good faith. Readers and powerful writers such as Henry Nash Smith found that resolution in *Huckleberry Finn* during the 60s—echoing the mood of the country, where suddenly, it looked like integration was really going to happen. The reason this matters here is that this was the moment that Bob refers to when he talks about reading *Huckleberry Finn* in college and graduate school (indeed, I remember Henry Nash Smith coming to Stanford to speak during the late 60s, though Bob may have

gone to Harvard by then). And the moments, critical and historical, in which we read when we are young often set the patterns for our readings throughout our lives, even when we think we've moved on. So there's this critical/historical moment lying somewhere in the bottom of our scholarly consciousnesses, and then there's the text itself and our repeated readings of it, over time, in and out of different classrooms, read with and against other texts and, most importantly, with and against the course of our individual and national lives.

I don't think *Huckleberry Finn* is a blues book; I think our reading of it is the blues. The sexiness of the book consists of our responses to it, responses that are shaped by our accumulated critical contexts over our lifetimes. Bob says that reading resistantly (a phrase he credits to Edward Said but that I would credit to Judith Fetterley's 1978 *The Resisting Reader*—perhaps *the* seminal text in teaching women how to resist interpellation by critical contexts) is part of the blues: that you know you are going to be betrayed if you trust. The mid-century critics taught us to trust that this text was going to show us a way to have genuine relations between white and black Americans—that we could reach out, make contact, and not be betrayed. The problem is that the text *does* betray: Huck never does come to make a statement about racism, nothing in the social environment is changed by his acts, and Jim is, well, Jim. And then there are—as both Bob and Jonathan point out—all those sections that are neither uplifting nor lyrical. These, by the way, constitute the majority of the book—if you go through the text counting lyrical passages you'll notice that they are mighty scarce. What's there has been quoted so many times most of us can recite them by heart.

So what are we left with? Critics, teachers, scholars, singing the blues. “They told me I could trust you, baby, but you’ve gone and let me down.” Ever since I gave up trying to find unity, thematic or otherwise, in *Huckleberry Finn*, I’ve more and more seen it as a series of moments, some of which are repeated and others that stand alone. Mind you, I like this—it helps me see Mark Twain operating across time, writing, intermittently, out of his own very different moments. In the novel, there’s the opening and closing sections, where the boys play tricks on Jim. There’s the sections where Huck struggles to extricate himself from his various encumbering encounters with other people—sections where, as Bob rightly points out, Huck shows himself an expert at improvisation. And then there’s the lyrical sections, the textual moments when words come together so beautifully that readers want to believe that they are in another text—one that is predicated on human love and environmental harmony rather than on selfishness, stupidity, and destruction. That’s why “readings” of this book sound so different. It depends on which moment you are focusing on. And that mostly depends on who you are and what’s going on around you. Like every really good piece of literature, this novel never falls into the same pattern twice.

So the blues, here, I think, is us. Our blues. Our desire to have an American text that helps us do what we have not done even yet—our yearning for cross-racial love, for connection, for peace. *Huckleberry Finn* flirts, but it doesn’t come through. Mark Twain, the man behind the book, flirted with it too. Maybe the blues we are singing reflects all these failures: his, to manifest a relationship built on love and respect, and ours, reaching back through time, to connect with his desire, and to create a society where such relationships are not remarkable.

* This article refers to Robert O'Meally's introduction to *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain, Barnes & Noble Classics edition, 2003.

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¹ See Jonathan Arac, "Huckleberry Finn" As Idol and Target (cited in Bob's piece), p. 36; developed further in Jonathan Arac, "Huckleberry Finn" in Franco Moretti, ed., The Novel (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2006), vol. 1: 851.

² See Jonathan Arac, "Revisiting Huck: Idol and Target," Mark Twain Annual 3 (2005): 9-12