

Ling 103: Language Structure and Verbal Art Imperfect Rhyme in Blues Songs

'Blind' Willie Samuel McTell (Georgia 1901-1959; recordings 1927-1935)

Kind Mama

She's a real kind mama looking for another man
She ain't got nobody to hold her hand

Way down yonder on Cripple Creek
Hemp don't grow but sixteen feet
Would go to bed but it ain't no use
They pile up on the bed like chickens on a roost

The rooster chew tobacco and the hen dip snuff
Said he can't shimmy but he struts his stuff

See that fella with that derby on
Look good to me just as sure as you're born
I'll tell you the truth and it's a natural fact
Shoulda been a rule 'gainst being that black

See that fellow that's standing right there
He don't live here but he's somewhere
Little patch of hair right around his mouth
Like he swallowed a mule and left his tail hanging out

Wake up in the morning at a half past three
Thanks pretty mama done put out what I need
Soon in the morning at half past four
Hot shot rider rappin' at her door
Went to the door and the door was locked
Think that baby tryin' to eagle rock

Imperfect Rhymes:

| | |
|--------------|--------|
| man/hand | {∅, d} |
| creek/feet | {k, t} |
| use/roost | {∅, t} |
| [on/born] | |
| [fact/black] | |
| mouth/out | {θ, t} |
| three/need | {∅, d} |
| locked/rock | {t, ∅} |

dialect may lack /r/ in the syllable coda
/t/ might not even be pronounced

Scarey Day Blues

.....

My good gal got a mojo, she's tryin' to keep it hid
My good woman got a mojo, she's tryin' to keep it hid
But Georgia Bill got somethin' to find that mojo with

I said she got that mojo and she won't let me see
I said she got that mojo and she won't let me see
And every time I start to love her she's tried to put that jinx on me

Well, she shakes like the Central and she wobbles like the L&N
I said she shakes like the Central and she wobbles like the L&N
Well, she's a hot-shot mama and I'm scared to tell her where I been

Said my baby got something, she won't tell her daddy what it is
My good woman got something, she won't tell her papa what it is
But when I crawl into my bed, I just can't keep my black self still

Well I done got reckless and I broke my mama's rule
Well I done got reckless and I broke my baby's rule
I been runnin' around Georgia with the doggone Scarey Day Blues

Imperfect Rhymes

| | | |
|------------|---|--------|
| hid/with | ? | {d, θ} |
| [N/been] | | |
| is/still | | {z, l} |
| rule/blues | | {l, z} |

Other Songs by Blind Willie McTell

Statesboro Blues

stop/hot
blues/too

Stole Rider Blues

rails/jail
friend/again
hand/man

Cold Winter Day

dime/mind
[clothes/outdoors]

Mama T'Ain't Long for Day

long/gone
satisfied/cry

Come on Around to My House Mama

name/insane

Broke Down Engine

locked/lock

Coolin' Board

wheel/feels

broke/sold

[slow/more]

board/door

[low/more]

down/ground

again/friend

Death Room Blues

room/soon

turtledove/loved

alone/home

[cryin'/mine]

Lord, Send Me an Angel

hand/man

black/like

Runnin' Me Crazy

myself/else

mind/time

outdoors/go

rules/blues

Weary Hearted Blues

blue/blues

kind/mine

alone/home

My Baby's Gone

good/woods

Talkin' To Myself

hand/man

strange/string

more/hailed

hid/with

ground/down

Robert Johnson (Mississippi Delta, 1930s)

Terraplane Blues

And I feel so lonesome, you hear me when I moan
When I feel so lonesome, you hear me when I moan
Who been drivin' my Terraplane, for you since I been gone.

I'd said I flash your lights, mama, you horn won't even blow
(spoken: Somebody's been runnin' my batteries down on this machine)
I even flash my lights, mama, this horn won't even blow
Got a short in this connection, hoo well, babe, it's way down below

I'm goin' heist your hood, mama, I'm bound to check your oil
I'm goin' heist your hood, mama, mmm, I'm bound to check your oil
I got a woman that I'm lovin', way down in Arkansas

Now, you know the coils ain't even buzzin', little generator won't get the spark
Motor's in a bad condition, you gotta have these batteries charged
But I'm cryin', please, please don't do me wrong.
Who been drivin' my Terraplane1 now for, you since I been gone.

Mr. highway man, please don't block the road
Puh hee hee, please don't block the road
'Cause she's reachin' a cold one hundred and I'm booked and I got to go

Mmm mmm mmm mmm mmm
Yoo ooo ooo ooo, you hear me weep and moan
Who been drivin' my Terraplane1 now for, you since I been gone

I'm gon' get down in this connection, keep on tanglin' with your wires
I'm gon' get down in this connection, oh well, keep on tanglin' with these wires
And when I mash down on your little starter, then your spark plug will give me fire

Note: the Terraplane was a 1930's car model of the Hudson Motor Company

From Four Till Late

From four 'till late, I was wringin' my hands and cryin'
From four 'till late, I was wringin' my hands and cryin'
Believe to my soul, that your daddy's Gulfport bound

From Memphis to Norfolk, is a thirty-six hours ride
From Memphis to Norfolk, is a thirty-six hours ride
A man is like a prisoner and he's never satisfied

A woman is like a dresser, some man always ramblin' through its drawers
A woman is like a dresser, some man always ramblin' through its drawers
It cause so many men, wear an apron overall

From four 'till late, she get with a no-good bunch and clown
From four 'till late, she get with a no-good bunch and clown
Now, she won't do nothin', but tear a good man' reputation down

When I leave this town, I'm gon' bid you fare, farewell
And when I leave this town, I'm gon' bid you fare, farewell
And when I return again, you'll have a great long story to tell

Dead Shrimp Blues

I woke up this mornin' and all my shrimps was dead and gone
woke up this mornin', ooh, and all my shrimp was dead and gone
I was thinkin' about you, baby, why you hear me weep and moan

I got dead shrimps here, someone is fishin' in my pond
I got dead shrimps here, ooh, someone fishin' in my pond
I've served my best bait, baby, and I can't do that no more

Everything I do, babe, you got your mouth stuck out
Hole where I used to fish, you got me posted out
Everything I do, you got your mouth stuck out,
at the hole where I used to fish, baby, you've got me posted out

I got dead shrimps here, 'n' someone fishin' in my pond
I got dead shrimps here, someone fishin' in my pond
Catchin' my goggle-eye perches, and they barbequin' the bone

Now you taken my shrimps, baby, you know you turned me down
I couldn't do nothin', until I got myself unwound
You taken my shrimps, oohh, know you turned me down
Babe, I couldn't do nothin', until I got myself unwound

Milkcow's Calf Blues (Take 2)

Tell me, milk cow, what on earth is wrong with you?
Ooo ooo eee, milk cow, what on earth is wrong with you?
Now, you have a little calf, hoo hoo, and your milk is turnin' blue

Now, your calf is hungry, I believe he needs a suck
Now, your calf is hungry, hoo hoo, I believe he needs a suck
But your milk is turnin' blue, hoo hoo, I believe he's outta luck

Now, I feel like milkin' and my, cow won't come
I feel like churnin' it and my, milk won't turn
I'm cryin', please, please, don't do me wrong
If you see my milk cow, baby, now-how, please, drive her home

My milk cow been ramblin', hoo hee, for miles around
My milk cow been ramblin', hoo hoo, for miles around
Well, now, can you suck on some other man's bull cow,
hoo hoo, in this strange man's town

Traveling Riverside Blues

If your man get personal, want you to have your fun
If your man get personal, want you to have your fun
Best come on back to Friars Point, mama, and barrelhouse all night long

I got womens in Vicksburg, clean on into Tennessee
I got womens in Vicksburg, clean on into Tennessee
But my Friars Point rider, now, hops all over me

I ain't gon' to state no color but her, front teeth crowned with gold
I ain't gon' to state no color but her, front teeth is crowned with gold
She got a mortgage on my body, now, and a lien on my soul

Lord, I'm goin' to Rosedale, gon' take my rider by my side
Lord, I'm goin' to Rosedale, gon' take my rider by my side
We can still barrelhouse baby, on the riverside

Now you can squeeze my lemon 'til the juice run down my...
You can squeeze my lemon 'til the juice run down my leg
(spoken: *That's what I'm talkin' 'bout, now*)
But I'm goin' back to Friars Point, if I be rockin'to my head

Note 1: Friars Town is a small town in a bend of the Levee river, Mississippi

Note 2: Rosedale is further south, some twenty miles west of Cleveland, Mississippi

Robert Johnson Imperfect Rhymes

Source: Robert Johnson, *Complete Recordings*

| <i>Rhyme</i> | <i>Song</i> [take] |
|---|------------------------------------|
| time/mind goodbye/satisfied | Kind-hearted woman [2] |
| six/trick | Sweet-home Chicago |
| anymore/so cryin'/mind [-aɪn] long/home | Ramblin' on My Mind [2] |
| side/right wrong/harm [hɔm] | When You Got a Good Friend [1] |
| friend/again | Come on in My Kitchen [1] |
| moan/gone wrong/gone oil/Arkansas [ɔ] road/go spark/charged wires/fire | Terraplane Blues |
| chain/man mind/time home/moan | Phonograph Blues [2] |
| come/none mind/time come/none gun/come | 32-20 Blues [1] 32-20 Blues [2] |
| dime/mine room/soon sleep/beat | They're Red Hot |
| gone/moan pond/harm pond/bone down/unround | Dead Shrimp Blues |

ride/by
west/distress
ride/by
here/care

Cross Road Blues [1]

Cross Road Blues [2]

dyin'/blind

Walkin' Blues

Lord/road
time/dime/mine

Last Fair Deal

man/hand
down/round

Preachin' Blues

long/gone

If I had Possession over Judgment Day

last/pass
friends/in
road/go

Stones in My Passway

know/more
time/mind

I'm a Steady Rollin' Man

cryin'/bound
drawers/overhall

From Four Until Late

go/door
time/mind
home/alone
door/go

Hell Hound on My Trail

Malted Milk

Drunken Hearted Man

Me and the Devil Blues

fun/long
gold/soul
leg/head

Travelin' Riverside

destiny/every day [-ei]

Honeymoon Blues

hand/vain
Mae/woe

Love in Vain Blues

come/turn
wrong/home
around/town

Milkcow's Calf Blues

Classification of Imperfect Rhymes based on Phonological Properties

All rhymes are (at least) Blind Willie McTell's unless indicated (RJ), in which case they are Robert Johnson's only

Frequent:

1. Rhymes that are only apparent

(i.e. phonetic shape is the same in the artist's dialect)

| | |
|-------------------|-----------|
| low/door | [ɔ:] |
| go/more | [ɔ:] |
| cryin'/mine | [ɑ(ɪ)n] |
| oil/ Arkansas | [ɔ:] (RJ) |
| destiny/every day | [eɪ] (RJ) |

2. Coda Coronal Ignored (or perhaps deleted in which case under 1)

| | | | |
|------------------|-------------|------------|---------------------|
| use/roost | locked/rock | fact/black | [t] |
| man/hand | three/need | board/door | [d] |
| blues/too | good/woods | | [z] |
| rule/blues | | [u:, u:z] | with L-vocalization |
| more/hailed | | [ɔ:, ɔ:d] | |
| drawers/overhaul | | [ɔ:z, ɔ:] | (RJ) |

3. Coda differs only in PLACE of articulation

| | | |
|-------------|-------------|------------------------|
| stop/hot | [p t] | <i>voiceless stops</i> |
| sleep/beat | [p t] (RJ) | |
| creek/feet | [k t] | |
| leg/head | [g d] | <i>voiced stops</i> |
| myself/else | [f s] | <i>fricatives</i> |
| name/insane | [m n] | <i>nasals</i> |
| room/soon | [m n] | |
| long/gone | [ŋ n] | |
| wrong/harm | [ŋ m] (RJ) | |
| dime/mind | [m nd] | |
| pond/harm | [m nd] (RJ) | |

Less Common:

(much more common for Robert Johnson than for Blind Willie McTell)

4. **Vowel Difference**

Difference in Height (common):

moan/gone [ou ɔ] (RJ) *back vowels*

home/wrong

pond/bone [ɑ ou] (RJ)

chain/man [eɪ æ] (RJ) *front Vowels*

hand/vain (RJ)

Difference in Backness (less common):

Mae/woe [eɪ ou] (RJ) *Mid Vowels*

black/like [æ ɑ(ɪ)] *Low Vowels*

cryin'/bound [ɑɪ, aʊ] (RJ)

Phonetically Uncertain

here/care [iə eə]? (RJ)

Lord/road [ɔ: ou]? (RJ)

come/turn [ʌ ɜː]? (RJ)

friends/in [ɪndz, ɪn] (RJ)

Rare:

5. Coda differs only in [continuant]: fricative vs. stop

hid/with [d ð] ?

mouth/out [θ t]

6. Differ in voice and PLACE

broke/sold [ouk, oud]

spark/charged [k, ʃ] (RJ)

7. Coda differs in [sonorant]: sonorant vs. obstruent

is/still [ɪz, ɪl]

8. Nucleus difference plus coda differs in PLACE

strange/string [eɪŋ, ɪŋ]

long/home [ɔŋ oum] (RJ)

fun/long [ʌn, ɔŋ] (RJ)