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“Bells for John Whiteside’s Daughter”

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Mississippi Quarterly, Volume 66, Number 2, Spring 2013, pp. 339-342 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mss.2013.0031>

Mississippi
Quarterly

The Journal
Of Southern Cultures



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Morrison, O'Connor, Gay, Ransom,
Faulkner, and J. McHenry Jones

Vol. 66, No. 2 Spring 2013

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NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

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IT IS A TRIBUTE TO JOHN CROWE RANSOM'S "BELLS FOR JOHN WHITESIDE'S Daughter" (1924)¹ that it has elicited commentary for almost nine decades, each critical approach revealing a different aspect of the artistry of the poem: the effectiveness of its meter, the role of comedy, the role of ironic understatement, the precisely chosen language that controls tone, the traditional elegiac structure, and so on.² In 1943, Robert Penn Warren suggested that the poem springs from the unhappy intersection of two clichés: "Heavens, won't that child ever be still, she is driving me distracted" and "She was such an active, healthy-looking child, who would've ever thought she would just up and die?" He pointed out that the second cliché turns out to be a "savagely ironical" answer to the first (13).

I wish to point out that this irony is heightened by one of the famous lines from the burial service in *The Book of Common Prayer*: "In the midst of life we are in death." The neighbor who speaks the poem anticipates hearing these customary words at the funeral that will presently take place. We can be fairly sure that the service is imminent because the final stanza begins with a reference to the church bells summoning the parish: "now go the bells, and we are ready" (17). The prayer book statement means either that we meet death in the midst of life or that we carry in life the inevitability of our death. However the speaker might understand the statement, his words describing John Whiteside's daughter reflect the intimate connection between life and

¹Although I cite *Chills and Fever* (1924), I have given the poem's title in the form that has become customary since the publication of *Selected Poems* (1945). *Chills and Fever* gives the titles as "Bells for John Whitesides' Daughter."

²See Parsons, Schwartz, Montgomery, Bradford, Vesterman, Fowler, and Coulthard.

death and produce a poignant irony which is sustained throughout his commentary on the girl.

The speaker's present perception and memory of the girl are informed by the prayer book's "In the midst of life we are in death." The word "speed" in the poem's first line, "There was such speed in her little body," refers to the girl's life as well as her death: initially the term characterizes her rapid and lively movements as she engaged in play, but the word "speed" also brings to mind the ironic fact that her life passed at great speed. In the second line, the "lightness in her footfall" operates similarly: the word "lightness" suggests the nimbleness of her easy movements—she was light on her feet—but the term also points to the insubstantiality of her tread because the child had hardly touched the world when she left it. The speaker is first astonished and later, in the last stanza, vexed over the girl's "brown study" (19), which captures her lively inner life, since the expression refers to a serious reverie, thoughtful absent-mindedness, or a state of mental abstraction or musing. The term, says Warren, "reminds one of those moments of childish pensiveness into which the grownup cannot penetrate" (13). The "brown study" is also, of course, a picture of the girl's stillness in death. All of these terms convey the notion of death in the midst of life.

The three middle stanzas, which cram all of the little tomboy's naughty activities into one sentence, is replete with terms pointing to both life and death. The term "wars," the sounds of which had reached the speaker's "high window" (5) to disturb his peace and from which he had looked down upon her irritating behavior, refers initially to her lively play yet immediately reminds him—and us—of the girl's fight to the death. The next line looks towards the "orchard trees and beyond" (6) (the site of her "wars"), faintly alluding to Stonewall Jackson's famous statement just before he died from the wounds of his war: "I must cross over the river and into the trees." We see that indeed it was among the "orchard trees and beyond" that she "took arms against her shadow" (7), actively fighting against the image of her own insubstantiality: she fought against death, and the shadow that was always with her prevailed. Here again the poem seems to stem from the prayer book's burial service: "He cometh up, and is cut down like a flower; he fleeth as it were a shadow."

In the description of the geese found in the third and fourth stanzas, the words and images also look at life and death at once. The girl, in her lively play, got a frantic rise out of the "lazy geese" (9) in the pond as she

ran after them with a stick. "Dripping their snow on the green grass" (10) in the midst of a "war" strongly suggests the girl's premature death, for the snow comes in the spring of her life. The "Tricking and stopping" (11) of the geese portray their maneuvers to escape her marauding, but the geese are also an objective correlative for the girl herself: she has tricked everyone by stopping in her tracks. The cry of "Alas" (12), which makes a poignant transition from the third to the fourth stanza, is at first a response to the bothersome activity of the child, but it immediately becomes a cry of deep grief: an unexpected death in the midst of life. The cry is indeed for "the tireless heart within the little / Lady" (13-14), the heart that was given over to constant and tireless play but that tired too soon—and played out.

The poem's theme "In the midst of life we are in death" is supported by its structure. First, the beginning and ending stanzas create a frame depicting the neighbors standing before an open casket in which the girl is lying "so primly propped" (20), and then in the middle of the poem—in its midst—there are the representations of her active life. The poignancy of her death is enhanced by the cut-short, three-foot lines at the end of each stanza (the penultimate stanza is the one exception) that effectively sound the note of incompleteness, of expectations not being met.

At the poem's end the speaker discovers that he has come to terms with his uneasy feelings over his earlier wish that the child be still and quiet. As the poem begins he is merely astonished to see her so still—in her brown study—but in the end he is "vexed at her brown study" (19). The change in attitude has come about through an imaginative bond with the dead girl: he has made the leap to see her play as she saw it, and her death has become his own bereavement. His words and images suggest a profound understanding of the truth of the famous statement from *The Book of Common Prayer*—"In the midst of life we are in death." His spirit is chastened by this deep insight.

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