

# “THE WIFE OF USHER’S WELL”

— A Study of the Variation of a Ballad —

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## Texts

1. Child A. Child's note reads as follows: "*Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, II, III, 1802, from the recitation of an old woman residing near Kirkhill, in West Lothian." (Child, *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, II, 238-239.)

1. There lived a wife at Usher's well  
And wealthy wife was she;  
She had three stout and stalwart sons,  
And sent them oer the sea.
2. They hadna been a week from her,  
A week but barely ane,  
Whan word came to the carline wife  
That her three sons were gane.
3. They hadna been a week from her,  
A week but barely three,  
Whan word come to the carlin wife  
That her sons she'd never see.
4. "I wish the wind may never cease,

Nor fashes in the flood,  
Till my three sons come hame to me,  
In earthly flesh and blood."

5. It fell about the Martinmas,  
When nights were lang and mirk,  
The carlin wife's three sons came hame,  
And their hats were o the birk.

6. It neither grew in syke nor ditch,  
Nor yet in any sheugh;  
But at the gates o Paradise,  
That birk grew fair eneugh.

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7. "Blow up the fire, my maidens,  
Bring water from the well;  
For a' my house shall feast this night,  
Since my three sons are well."

8. And she has made to them a bed,  
She's made it large and wide,  
And she's taen her mantle her about,  
Sat down at the bed-side.

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9. Up then crew the red, red cock,  
And up and crew the gray;  
The eldest to the youngest said,  
'Tis time we were away.

10. The cock he hadna crawd but once,  
And clapped his wings at a',  
When the youngest to the eldest said,  
Brother, we must awa.

11. "The cock doth crow, the day doth daw,  
The channerin worm doth chide;

Gin we be mist out o our place,  
A sair pain we maun bide.

12. "Fare ye weel, my mother dear!  
Fareweel to barn and byre!  
And fare ye weel, the bonny lass  
That kindles my mother's fire!"

II. Child B, from "The Clerk's Twa Sons o Owsenford," stanzas 18-23. Child notes as follows: "Kinloch MSS, V, 403, stanzas 18-23. In the handwriting of James Chambers, as sung to his maternal grandmother, Janet Grieve, seventy years before, by an old woman, a Miss Ann Gray, of the Neidpath Castle, Peeblesshire: Jan. 1, 1829." (Child, *op. cit.*, II, 239.)

1. The hallow days o Yule are come,  
The nights are lang and dark,  
An in an cam her ain twa sons,  
Wi their hats o the bark.
2. "O eat an drink, my merry men a',  
The better shall ye fare,  
For my twa sons the are come hame  
To me for evermair."
3. She has gaen an made their bed,  
An she's made it saft and fine,  
An she's happit them wi her gay mantel,  
Because they were her ain.
4. O the young cock crew i the merry Linkem,  
An the wild fowl chirpd for day;  
The aulder to the younger did say,  
Dear brother, we maun away.
5. "Lie still, lie still a little wee while,  
Lie still but if we may;  
For gin my mother miss us away

She'll gae mad or it be day."

6. O it's they've taen up their mother's mantel,  
An they've hangd it on the pin:  
"O lang may ye hing, my mother's mantel,  
Or ye hap us again!"

III. Child C. " 'The Widow Woman,' *Shropshire Folk-Lore*, edited by Charlotte Sophia Burne, 1883-86, p. 541; 'taken down by Mr. Hubert Smith, 24th March, 1883, from the recitation of an elderly fisherman at Bridgworth, who could neither read nor write, and had learnt it some forty years before from his grandmother in Corve Dale.' " (Child, *op. cit.*, III, 513.)

1. There was a widow-woman lived in far Scotland,  
And in far Scotland she did live,  
And all her cry was upon sweet Jesus,  
Sweet Jesus so meek and mild.
2. Then Jesus arose one morning quite soon,  
And arose one morning betime,  
And away he went to far Scotland,  
And to see what the good woman want.
3. And when he come to far Scotland,  
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Crying, What, O what, does the good woman want,  
That is calling so much on me?
4. "It's you go rise up my three sons,  
Their names, Joe, Peter and John,  
And put breath in their breast,  
And clothing on their backs,  
And immediately send them to far Scotland,  
That their mother may take some rest."
5. Then he went and rose up her three sons,  
Their names, Joe, Peter and John,

- And did immediately send them to far Scotland,  
That their mother may take some rest.
6. Then she made up a supper so neat,  
As small, as small as a yew-tree leaf,  
But never one bit they could eat.
7. Then she made up a bed so soft,  
The softest that ever was seen,  
And the widow-woman and her three sons  
They went to bed to sleep.
8. There they lay ; about the middle of the night,  
Bespeaks the youngest son :  
“The white cock he has crowed once,  
The second has, so has the red.”
9. And then bespeaks the eldest son :  
“I think, I think it is high time  
For the wicked to part from their dead.”
10. Then they laid (=led) her along a green road,  
The greenest that ever was seen,  
Until they came to some far chaperine,  
Which was builded of lime and sand ;  
Until they came to some far chaperine,  
Which was builded with lime and stone.
11. And then he opened the door so big,  
And the door so very wide ;  
Said he to her three sons, Walk in !  
But told her to stay outside.
12. “Go back, go back !” sweet Jesus replied,  
“Go back, go back !” says he ;  
“For thou hast nine days to repent  
For the wickedness that thou hast done.”

13. Nine days then was past and gone,  
And nine days then was spent,  
Sweet Jesus called her once again,  
And took her to heaven with him.

IV. Child D. "Communicated, 1896, by Miss Emma M. Backus, of North Carolina, who notes that it has long been sung by 'poor whites' in the mountains of Polk County in that State." (Child, *op. cit.*, V, 294.)

1. There was a lady fair and gay,  
And children she had three:  
She sent them away to some northern land,  
For to learn their grammeree.
2. They hadn't been gone but a very short time,  
About three months to a day,  
When sickness came to that land  
And swept those babes away.
3. There is a king in the heavens above  
That wears a golden crown:  
She prayed that he would send her babies home  
To-night or in the morning soon.
4. It was about the Christmas time,  
When the nights was long and cool,  
She dreamed of her three little lonely babes  
Come running in their mother's room.
5. The table was fixed and the cloth was spread,  
And on it put bread and wine:  
"Come sit you down, my three little babes,  
And eat and drink of mine."
6. "We will neither eat your bread, dear mother,  
Nor we'll neither drink your wine;  
For to our Saviour we must return  
To-night or in the morning soon."

7. The bed was fixed in the back room ;  
     On it was some clean white sheet,  
     And on the top was a golden cloth,  
     To make those little babies sleep.
8. "Wake up! wake up!" says the eldest one,  
     "Wake up! it's almost day.  
     And to our Saviour we must return  
     To-night or in the morning soon."
9. "Green grass grows at our head, dear mother,  
     Green moss grows at our feet ;  
     The tears that you shed for us three babes  
     Won't wet our winding sheet."

V. "There was a Lady in Merry Scotland," from Leather, *The Folk-Lore of Herefordshire*, p. 198. Sung by Mrs. Loveridge, Dylwin, 1908. (Bronson, *The Traditional Tunes of the Child Ballads*, p. 249, text 3.)

1. There lived a lady in merry Scotland,  
     And she had sons all three ;  
     And she sent them out into merry Eng-e-land,  
     For to learn some English deeds.
2. They had not been in a-merry Eng-e-land,  
     For twelve months and one day,  
     When the news came back to their own dear mother  
     That their bodies were in cold clay.
3. "I will not believe in a man," she said,  
     "Nor in Christ in eternity,  
     Till they send me back my own three sons,  
     And the same as they went from me."
4. And God put life all in their bodies,  
     Their bodies all in their chest,  
     And sent them back to their own dear mother,

For in heaven they could take no rest.

5. As soon as they reached to their own mother's gates,  
So loud at the bell they ring,  
There was none so ready as their own dear mother,  
For to loose the children in.
6. The cloth was spread, the meat put on ;  
"No meat, Lord, can we take,  
Since it's so long and many a day,  
Since we have been here before."
7. The bed was made, the sheets put on ;  
"No bed, Lord, can we take,  
It's been so long and many a day,  
Since we have been here before."
8. Then Christ did call for the roasted cock,  
That was feathered with His only (holy?) hands ;  
He crowed three times all in the dish,  
In the place where he did stand.
9. "Then farewell stick and farewell stone,  
Farewell to the maidens all.  
Farewell to the nurse that gave us our suck";  
And down the tears did fall.



## Introductory

The purpose of this essay is to describe some aspects of the variation of a ballad, taking the case of "The Wife of Usher's Well" as the specific subject for discussion. This well-known ballad on the devoted mother and her three hapless sons first appeared in print in Scott's *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, 1802. Independent from this printed document, however, this ballad drifted in England, in Scotland and in America in many altered forms by way of oral transmission. Numerous different texts have been recorded by ballad collectors during the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century. We have five versions from England and Scotland. The American version, though not varying much among themselves, totals eighty-one including short and fragmentary ones. The oldest known version of "The Wife of Usher's Well" is noted for its poetic quality, and it is usually placed among such famous ones as "Lord Randal" or "Sir Patrick Spens." The main concern of the following discussion is to illustrate, through the comparative study of different texts, what elements of lyrical, dramatic, and narrative qualities of the ballad are subject to change in the oral tradition.

It is hard to determine whether the process of oral transmission improves or degenerates a ballad. A ballad singer might improvise a stanza or two when the memory fails him and thus might add a new local color to the story. The traditional theme might newly inspire a local poet and he might re-create the old version into his own original one. The collective memory of the folk, however, is never hesitant in rejecting what is ephemeral. As E. K. Wells observes in *The Ballad Tree* "the contributing elements [are] worked over by the sure canons of popular taste and polished in the process of tradition."<sup>1</sup> Thus a ballad acquires simplicity and objectivity of expression. Wells writes elsewhere in the same book :

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1. Wells, *The Ballad Tree*, 194.

The ballad, being concerned with the story, cannot cumber itself with individualizing each object, and resorts to a stock vocabulary which soon becomes familiar ...

This conventional description, known as the ballad commonplace, may belong to a primitive stage of narrative that preceded one of more detail; or it may represent evolution from detail in the direction toward which all ballad style progresses, that of simplifying to the utmost in order to intensify the action.<sup>1</sup>

A ballad, leaving out all that is personal and temporal, comes to focus itself upon what is essential to the story, presenting the scenes dramatically and with emotional detachment. The elimination of details may sometimes result in making the story highly suggestive and suspenseful.

The smoothing away of the individual angles, however, has in fact a twofold consequence upon the development of a ballad. Does a ballad, in committing itself to the memory of people, not lose the subtle shades of expression which we owe to some unknown poet? Are the tragic pathos and poignancy of the story not weakened by later interpretations? These are the questions which occur to us especially when we deal with such a piece as "The Wife of Usher's Well."

Many critics maintain the individual authorship for the *Minstrelsy* version of our ballad. Arthur K. Moore remarks as follows on the so-called "anthology pieces," in which the present ballad is included:

Unless highly unlikely results are to be ascribed to communal re-creation, the existence of single and successful craftsmanship must be recognized for them and at no great distance from the earliest dates of record.<sup>2</sup>

And here is E. K. Wells:

Communal authorship ... is inconceivable in ballads of more intricate structure. A poet of no mean ability must have composed such a ballad as "The Wife of Usher's Well."<sup>3</sup>

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1. Wells, *op. cit.*, 82.

2. Moore, "The Literary Status of the English Popular Ballad," *Comparative Literature*, Vol. 10, 1958, 18.

3. Wells, *op. cit.*, 194.

Susan Langer observes in *Feeling and Form* that

it is highly improbable that no one invented such a poem as "The Wife of Usher's Well." No matter how many versions there may be, someone composed the tale originally in meter and rhyme, and furnished the "poetic core" of all variants that may be gathered under its title.<sup>1</sup>

If the literary merit of a ballad is the product of an individual, a ballad is more likely to take the process of degeneration than that of improvement. Hence the observation of Francis J. Child that a ballad is the better the earlier it is caught and fixed in print.<sup>2</sup>

A ballad as a piece of poetry is nevertheless distinct from modern "art" poetry. It has an "open form" as distinguished from the determinate verbal structure of a more sophisticated literary work.<sup>3</sup> A version of a ballad may have been composed by an individual, but his art is not a self-conscious one. Its merit lies in its artlessness, the "artless and economical choice of the essential and the suggestive."<sup>4</sup> Child says as follows:

Though a man and not a people has composed them, still the author counts for nothing, and it is not by mere accident, but with the best reason, that they have come down to us anonymous. Hence, too, they are extremely difficult to imitate by the highly civilized modern man, and most of the attempts to reproduce this kind of poetry have been ridiculous failures.<sup>5</sup>

"The Wife of Usher's Well" in Scott's *Minstrelsy* involves this two-sided nature of a ballad. The pathos of the poem leads us to imagine the existence of some inspired poet behind its making; and yet it is full of commonplaces, and the incidents told in the story are simply based upon traditional folk beliefs, with nothing that is meant to be original or individual. What then are the factors that distinguish this particular version from others? What elements of this text, both in form and in content, are to reappear, be altered be or obliterated in other versions?

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1. Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 276.

2. Hart, "Professor Child and the Ballad," *PMLA*, Vol. 21(1906), 770.

3. cf. Langer, *op. cit.*, 275 ff.

4. Wells, *op. cit.*, 6.

5. Hart, *op. cit.*, 756-757.

The following analyses are made with these questions in mind.

Out of the numerous versions listed in the Bibliography, five versions are chosen here for special attention. They are arranged according to the dates in which they were taken down: the version from Scott's *Minstrelsy*, 1802 (Child A); the version from Kinloch MSS, 1829 (Child B); the one from *Shropshire Folklore*, 1883 (Child C); the one from North Carolina, 1896 (Child D); and the one from *The Folk-lore of Herefordshire*, 1908 (Bronson, text 3).

### A Comparison of Child A and Child D

Child D is the earliest dated American Version of "The Wife of Usher's Well." It was recorded nearly a century later than Child A, across the Atlantic. A was recited by an old woman living near Kirkhill, in West Lothian, Scotland. D was taken from a woman in North Carolina, who, it is noted, said that it had long been sung by the "poor whites" in the mountains of Polk County.<sup>1</sup> Here I chose D as a representative one of the American texts not only because it is the oldest one in the date of writing but also because it contains most of the important features and narrative components that should be discussed in relation to the American versions. As a narrative poem it is coherently developed with adequate details.

When one reads the opening stanzas of both versions, the first thing to be noted is that the American version is more detailed in explanation. A does not mention for what purpose the sons went abroad, to what country they went, or what the cause of their death was, while D gives all these explanations. A, on the other hand, is rich in auditory effect. The alliteration of *w*, *s* and *st* is immediately perceptible. The image of the "well" is traditionally associated with heathen notion of spirits and fairies,<sup>2</sup> but in the American text there is nothing especially

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1. See headnote to Child D on page 92 above.

2. Wimberly, *Folklore in the English and Scottish Ballads*, 316f.

mystic about the "lady fair and gay."

In Child A the eternal separation between the mortals and the dead is suggested by its reference to the "sea." Wimberly points out that crossing the river or the sea is one of the important heathen concepts about the journey to the otherworld.<sup>1</sup> Going "beyond the sea" appears in another revenant ballad, "Sweet William's Ghost" (77)<sup>2</sup>:

My bones are buried in yon kirk-yard,  
Afar beyond the sea,  
And it is but my spirit, Margaret,  
That's now speaking to thee. (A, 9)<sup>3</sup>

What, then, does the "northern land" in Child D signify? In the old Germanic tradition "north" signified the abode of some preternatural being, and especially of evil spirits;<sup>4</sup> but it should be doubted whether the American ballad singers in the nineteenth century retained the same concept. In some other American versions the last two lines of the second stanza are replaced by the following:

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1. Wimberly, *op. cit.*, 108 f.
  2. The number in the parentheses corresponds to the number given to the same ballad in Child's *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*.
  3. Child, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, II, 229.
  4. Gummere, *Germanic Origins*, 417 f: "[The Germanic gods] haunted no barrows, were cabined, cribbed, confined in no hut or village, but  
As broad and general as the casing air,  
housed in the far-off regions of the north. So ran the popular belief; and northward, with outstretched hands, our forefathers turned, when they engaged in ceremonial worship. With the introduction of Christianity, the east became the cardinal point of prayer, and the north, as we might expect, was banned as unlucky and a place of devils." See also Wimberly, *op. cit.*, 137.  
cf. *Paradise Lost*, V, ll. 687-691. The northern quarter is ascribed to Satan and his followers:

. . . all who under me [Satan] their banners wave,  
Homeward with flying march where we possess  
The Quarters of the North, there to prepare  
Fit entertainment to receive our King  
The great *Messiah*.

When death, cold death, came hastening along,  
And stole those babies away,<sup>1</sup>

and this image of death sweeping and erasing life all over the land may be associated with the cold blast that blows in the north. Especially in the American setting the "north" may only vaguely imply the place where the cultural foundation was first laid in that continent. One of the texts from Kentucky reads "North Amerikee."<sup>2</sup> We also have such lines as "Death [came] all over this *old world*"<sup>3</sup> or "Sickness came through that *old town*"<sup>4</sup> which may furnish some evidence to support this interpretation.

The word "grammeree" (or gramarye), which appears almost invariably in the American versions, has an implication of occult learning or magic as well as the more general meaning of grammar and learning. The woman who was "learned in gramarye" in "King Estmere" (60, st. 36) was certainly a magician or a witch.<sup>5</sup> Wells, however, suggests that this term in the American texts does not seem to retain the implication as it once had in Percy's *Reliques*. He considers this to be an illustration for the tendency of moralization and says: "The three sons of 'The Wife of Usher's Well,' no longer in pursuit of 'gramaree' or magic, have become three little school boys sent away to learn 'their grammars three.'"<sup>6</sup> Child's glossary defines the term for this case as "grammar" or "learning" and this interpretation is further supported by some other American variants of this term such as "grammar school" or "Bible Book."<sup>7</sup>

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1. See Bronson, *The Traditional Tunes of the Child Ballads*, "The Wife of Usher's Well," texts 25, 28, 30, 34, and 38.
  2. Bronson, text 21. The text 12 has "Northering State," and the text 18 has "North Carolina." "Northern School" appears in text 43.
  3. Bronson, text 7.
  4. Bronson, text 46.
  5. Child, II, 53. For explanation see Wimberly, *op. cit.*, 219 and 222.
  6. Wells, *op. cit.*, 146. See also Bronson, text 40.
  7. Bronson, text 16.

In fact the opening stanzas of text D reflect the style common to other traditional ballads such as "Lady Maisry" (65) and "Mary Hamilton" (173). I take the latter for an illustration here:

There were ladies, they lived in a bower,  
And oh but they were fair!  
The youngest o them is to some King's court,  
To learn some unco lair.

She hadna been in the King's court  
A twelve month and a day,  
Till of her they could get na wark,  
For wantonness and play. (B, 1-2)<sup>1</sup>

Child A, on the other hand, uses a typical ballad technique, the incremental repetition, to emphasize the tragic event and to bridge it to the next scene. The rhythmical structure of the first two lines of the second stanza is repeatedly seen in varied contents in traditional ballads. "The Lass of Roch Royal" (76), for instance, has the following lines: "She had not rode a mile, a mile, A mile but barely three" (A, 5).<sup>2</sup> A different version of the same ballad shows a closer resemblance in the structure of the stanza:

But she had na been in child-bed  
A day but barely three,  
Till word has come to Lady Janet,  
Love Gregory she would never see. (G. 2)<sup>3</sup>

Child A does not give any reason for the death of the sons, but when the story develops into the fourth stanza on the mother's curse upon the sea, it is suggested that the sons were drowned during their journey across the sea. The image of the never ceasing storm of the cursed sea is strikingly effective in expressing the restlessness, not only of the mother but also of the wandering spirits of the dead.

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1. Child, III, 385.
  2. Child, II, 216.
  3. *Ibid.*, 223.

Unlike Sir Patrick Spens or Ferdinand's drowned father in *Tempest* that lies "full fathom deep," the sons here are not quite resigned to the otherworld. In Child D, instead of cursing the sea, the mother prays "a king in heaven" to send the boys back to her. The "king" here is not clearly identified, but we may assume this to be the image of God or Christ as we have a reference to the "Savior" later in the same text. The mother's act of giving prayer indicates the fact she has somehow resigned herself to the will of God to which all the vicissitudes of human ways are eventually attributed. The curse upon the sea, however, expresses the human struggle against fate, the feeling of primitive people whose life is perpetually at the mercy of nature's power. In D the sons are expected to come home in return to the mother's prayer, but in A the motive for their return is nothing but the unquietness of the soul both of the living and of the dead.

And the sons actually return. The time of their visit is Martinmas in Child A, and it is about the Christmas time in the American text. Gummere remarks in his *Germanic Origins* that autumn was the time of feast for the dead in old Germanic tradition; a special festival used to be observed on the first day of October which, taken over in later days by Christian belief and altered somewhat in its implication by Christian influence, still survives in modern Europe as All Souls' Day on the second of November. Gummere says: "Autumn is the proper season for any *memento mori*, and with the equinoctial storms, the fall of leaf, the frost, the roar of winds when Woden and his train of spirits sweep the sky, man easily blends the universal picture of decay and the remembrance of parted souls."<sup>1</sup> Martinmas, which comes on the eleventh day of November, is close in date to All Souls' Day. In English and Scottish ballads, reference to the Martinmas time is made frequently and in most cases the occasion is considered to be either the time for family reunion or the time for hunting. The cold wind begins to blow and men return home to enjoy food and drink:

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1. Gummere, *op. cit.*, 355 f.



It fell about the Martinmas time  
The wind blew loud and cauld  
And all the knichts of tair Scotland  
They drew them to sum hald.<sup>1</sup>

Wells points out that "by Martinmas . . . the work of harvest is over, the needs of cattle and 'gier' are met, the barns are full of fodder. Now men may turn to the pleasure and excitement of life, and go raiding."<sup>2</sup> The setting of the time, he says, is "no mere poetic convention, but the natural expression of the countryman, whose clock is suntime, and whose calendar is the harvest."<sup>3</sup> The reference to the after-harvest time, we remember, is made with striking effect in Keats's "La Belle Dame Sans Merci." It must have been easy and quite natural to the ballad folk to blend their heathen beliefs and rural customs with Christian observances that came around the same time of the year. The Christmas time, in the same way, is the time for enjoying long nights at home. According to one interpretation Christmas is the time when "no spirits dare stir abroad," as we read in Marcellus's speech in *Hamlet*; it is the hallowed season when "the bird of dawning singeth all night long" to celebrate the birth of the Savior.<sup>4</sup> Gummere notes however that Christmas and New Year are the fit time for summoning and appeasing the spirits of the dead, because

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1. "Hugh Spencer's Feats in France" (158), C, 1; Child, III, 281. For further information about the passages containing "Martinmas" see Wimberly, *op. cit.*, 397.

2. Wells, *op. cit.*, 62.

3. *Ibid.*

4. cf. *Hamlet*, I, i, 157-164.

It faded on the crowing of the cock.  
Some say that ever 'gainst that season comes  
Wherein our Saviour's birth is celebrated,  
The bird of dawning singeth all night long;  
And then, they say, no spirit dare stir abroad,  
The nights are wholesome, then no planets strike,  
No fairy takes, nor witch hath power to charm,  
So hallow'd and so gracious is the time.

about this time of the year the nights are longest. "A host of superstitions and popular observances connected with this time of the year," he says, "have their roots in the primitive customs of manes-worship."<sup>1</sup>

The appearance of the "birk" in Child A reflects the Jewish belief where the birch tree is considered to be a sacred plant. According to Scott's note on this ballad in the *Minstrelsy*, "the notion that the souls of the blessed wear garlands seems to be of Jewish origin"; and he quotes from *Jewish Tradition* the story of a revenant who wore a garland of the herbs of paradise so that the wind of this world might not have power over him.<sup>2</sup> The allusion to the otherworld by the introduction of "birch trees" is also seen in one of the versions of "Sir Hugh, or the Jew's Daughter" (155):

Gang hame, gang hame, O mither dear,  
And shape my winding sheet,  
And at the birks of Mirryland town  
There you and I shall meet. (C, 16)<sup>3</sup>

"The birks of Mirryland town" seems equivalent to the "birk" that grows "at the gates o Paradise." It is further related to the idea that trees grow out of the place where the dead are buried; the heathen image of the otherworld, therefore, is often associated with forests.<sup>4</sup> Over the grave of Lord Thomas there grew a birch tree:

Lord Thomas was buried without kirk-wa,  
Fair Annet within the quiere,  
And o the tane thair grew a birk,  
The other a bonny briere.<sup>5</sup>

The gates of the grave is at the same time the gates of paradise, and it is the proper place for the meeting of the living and the dead.

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1. Gummere, *op. cit.*, 365
  2. Henderson, ed., *Sir Walter Scott's Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, III, 324.
  3. Child, III, 245.
  4. Wimberly, *op. cit.*, 122 f.
  5. "Lord Thomas and Fair Annet" (73), A, 29; Child, II, 183.

It should be noted in Child D that the mother "dreamed" of the return of her sons. In text A the return of the ghosts is stated as a "matter of course, not a subject for speculative wonder."<sup>1</sup> There the fact is simply stated, and there is no conscious evocation of the feeling of horror. The introduction of "dream," on the other hand, is based upon the conception that in this world of reason there can be no such experience as encountering the spirits of the dead in their bodily forms. Wimberly regards this as a case of rationalization of the irrational which is likely to take place in the course of transmission: "Dreams do not account for the returned dead in the best ghost ballads.... Where a dream does supply the *raison d'être* of the revenant or the spirit ... we are safe in saying ... that rationalization has been at work."<sup>2</sup> The "dream" image appears six times out of the twenty-seven longer versions in Bronson collection. By the introduction of the "dream" Child D loses somewhat in producing the sense of utter objectivity, and of actual probability, of the revenant's existence. The matter-of-factness in dealing with the ghosts in Child A paradoxically arouses the feeling of suspense and wonder.

The seventh and the eighth stanzas of Child A have a pathetic description of the mother who, without realizing the significance of the "birk" hats of the sons, bustles about to welcome them home:

"Blow up the fire, my maidens,  
Bring water from the well;  
For a' my house shall feast this night,  
Since my three sons are well."  
  
And she has made to them a bed,  
She's made it large and wide,  
And she's taen her mantle her about,  
Sat down at the bed-side.

Child D also has three stanzas about the mother's preparation of food and bed:

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1. Wells, *op. cit.*, 143.
  2. Wimberly, *op. cit.*, 239.

The table was fixed and the cloth was spread,  
 And on it put bread and wine :  
 "Come sit you down, my three little babes,  
 And eat and drink of mine."  
 "We will neither eat your bread, dear mother,  
 Nor we'll neither drink your wine ;  
 For to our Saviour we must return  
 To-night or in the morning soon."  
 The bed was fixed in the back room ;  
 On it was some clean white sheet,  
 And on the top was a golden cloth,  
 To make those little babies sleep.

In the former version the lively movement and the happy excitement of the mother are vividly presented before the eyes of the reader, but in the latter the description is flat and explanatory. The burning fire in the hearth and the fresh water from the well that appear in A are both associated with the places haunted by heathen spirits, and thus they enhance the charm of the atmosphere in which the revenants are received.<sup>1</sup> D, instead, has a table cleanly set with bread and wine. Bread and wine are the two fundamentals of the feast as we also see in versions of "Fair Annie" (62),<sup>2</sup> "Young Beichan" (53)<sup>3</sup> and "The Kitchie Boy" (252)<sup>4</sup> and it is clear that this custom of hospitality also has its root in Christian tradition. But this man-made luxury, it seems to me, cannot convey that sense of simplicity and vigor which is expressed through the images of fire and water.

It is interesting to compare the two different scenes of bedmaking. The mother uses a white sheet and a golden spread in D, but in A

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1. cf. Gummere, *op. cit.*, 356. "Such universal worship of the dead reflected the private and particular custom. Every hearthstone was an altar, and the father of the family was its priest. Wherever settled abodes were known, this altar was hallowed, and in many cases the fire burned there without intermission throughout the year. Here lingered the ancestral spirits, protecting and helpful, and here the head of the family offered to them food and drink. . ."

2. Child, II, 71; B, 12.

3. Child, I, 465; B, 13.

4. Child, IV, 402; A, 18.

“she’s made it large and wide.” In both cases the act of bed-making is associated with that of grave-making; here we see the old poetic convention of death-sleep correspondence. One of the boys in “The Twa Brothers” (49) digs the grave for the brother whom he has slain:

[He] dug a grave baith *deep and wide*  
And laid his body there. (A, 6)<sup>1</sup>

In an American version of “Sir Hugh” the son asks his mother:

And make my grave both *large and deep*,  
And my coffin of hazel and green birch. (N, 15)<sup>2</sup>

Barbara Allen, expecting the time of her death, asks her mother to make her bed:

O mother, mother, make my bed!  
O make it *soft and narrow*!  
Since my love died for me to-day,  
I’ll die for him to-morrow.<sup>3</sup>

We have a similar scene in “Lord Randal” in which the mother makes the death-bed for her poisoned son. The “white sheet” and the “golden cloth” also seem to have their origin in the old custom of making the bier and the winding sheet, with the one half of it gold and the other half silver. The following stanza is from “The Gay Goshawk” (96):

Call down, call down her brothers seven,  
To make for her a bier;  
The one side of the bonny beaten gold,  
And the other of the silver clear. (B, 17)<sup>4</sup>

If we associate the “white sheet” and the “golden cloth” in text D with the bier and the winding sheet, the situation there presented becomes highly ironical: the mother, intending to give earthly comfort

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1. Child, I, 438. The italics are mine.
  2. Child, III, 252. The italics are mine.
  3. “Bonny Barbara Allen” (84), A, 9; Child, II, 277. The italics are mine.
  4. Child, II, 359. For similar examples see “Willie’s Lyke-Wake” (25), E, 10&11, Child, I, 506; and “Lord Thomas and Fair Annet” (73), I, 37&38, Child, IV, 471.

to her sons, makes in fact a death-bed for them. But it is doubtful again if the American singers were aware of this old association, especially when we see in some of the American versions that the gorgeousness of the "golden cloth" is regarded as a sign of the mother's pride.<sup>1</sup>

The expression of the maternal affection in text A comes to its climax when the mother puts her mantle around herself and sits down at the bed-side. "She's taen her mantle her about" is a commonplace used to describe a woman going out for some urgent errand of her own. In "Sir Hugh," for instance, the mother takes "her mantle her about" and goes out in search of her kidnapped son:

She's taen her mantle her about  
Her coffer by the hand,  
And she's gaen out to seek her son,  
And wanderd oer the land. (A, 11)<sup>2</sup>

Another version of the same ballad reads:

She rolled her mantle her about,  
And sore, sore did she weep. (E, 14)<sup>3</sup>

The mantle thus is closely related to a woman's affection, desire, or agony,<sup>4</sup> and this association adds to the effect of our *Minstrelsy* version in stressing the motherly care.

In text D the children decline eating earthly food and sleeping upon earthly bed, thus indicating the fact that they are not of this world. What is merely hinted in text A is explicitly stated by the sons themselves in the American version. By having the sons refrain from telling the tragic fact before their mother, text A succeeds in producing the effect of dramatic irony. The implication of the birch tree is known to the audience but not to the unsuspecting mother.

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1. See page 127 below.

2. Child, III, 244.

3. Child, III, 247.

4. cf. "Tam Lin" (39), G, 16, Child, I, 350; and also "The Lass of Roch Royal" (76), G, 3, Child, II, 223. In "The Boy and the Mantle" (29) the mantle is used as a means to test a woman's chastity.

At daybreak the revenants are obliged to leave this world. The motive for their departure in A is the traditional belief that ghosts must leave the earth on the crowing of the cock. Examples for this commonplace are numerous. Often we have more than one cock to crow, and their colors are specified as we see in our text A.<sup>1</sup> Cocks seem to have functioned as the clock, as illustrated in the porter's speech in *Macbeth*: "Faith, sir, we were carousing till the second cock."<sup>2</sup> The introduction of the two (or three) cocks signifies the gradual approach of the final hour; and especially in text A the quick passing of the time and the restlessness of the sons are well expressed by the beating rhythm and alliteration of the following: "The cock doth crow, the day doth daw, / The channerin worm doth chide." The boys are worried if they should be late in returning to the grave they should suffer physical pain caused by the "channerin worm" under the ground. Here, quite in contrast to the image of the spirits wearing garlands of heavenly herbs, the dark, realistic image of the miry underworld is introduced. This grim image intensifies the pathos of the sons' farewell that appears in the last stanza. The bonny lass that kindles the mother's fire is a superb representation of the warmth and comfort of domestic life which the sons are now leaving forever.

The motive for the sons' departure in text D is that the "Saviour" is waiting for them in heaven. In the last stanza, however, appears again a heathen notion that too much grief for the dead disturbs their rest in the grave. This is the theme of "The Unquiet Grave" (78), a ballad of supreme lyrical beauty:

"I'll sit and mourn all at her grave  
For a twelvemonth and a day."

The twelvemonth and a day being up,

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1. For the reference to the cocks see "Sweet William's Ghost" (77), A, 14; B, 5&8; C, 9; G, 3; Child, II, 229-233. See also the quotation from *Hamlet*, footnote 4 on page 103 above.
  2. *Macbeth*, II, iii, 26. See also *King Lear*, III. iv, 111; *Romeo and Juliet*, IV, iv, 3.

The dead began to speak:  
 "Oh who sits weeping on my grave,  
 And will not let me sleep?"  
 "'T is I, my love, sits on your grave,  
 And will not let you sleep;  
 For I crave one kiss of your clay-cold lips,  
 And that is all I seek." (A, 2, 3,&4)<sup>1</sup>

We can gather from the grave scenes of both versions that the dead are regarded not only as heavenly existence but also as corporeal beings seeking physical comfort in the grave. Wimberly remarks as follows on the ghosts in our text A: "If in this case we grant the belief in spirits or souls, it is nevertheless clear that the spirits of the dead sons are thought of as inhabiting their corpses at will or are regarded as being never dissociated therefrom. Or the dead sons are thought of as leading a sort of dual existence, that of the corporeal 'soul' and that of the shadow soul, a notion entirely consonant with savage conceptions of the soul."<sup>2</sup> The ghost of Sweet William vanishes from the sight of Margaret in the green forest, but the next moment he is found speaking from his grave:

"Cold meal is my covering owre,  
 But an my winding sheet;  
 My bed it is full low, I say,  
 Down among the hongerey worms I sleep."<sup>3</sup>

The development of the more sophisticated concept of soul seems to have brought difficulty in treating the revenant theme. The idea of soul as immaterial being separate from the body led the ballad singers to add some explanatory remark about the corporeal ghost. Ramsey's version of "Sweet William's Ghost" (though it was recorded much earlier

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1. Child, II, 236. The same idea is seen in "Sir Ogey and Lady Elsey," the Danish analogue to "Sweet William's Ghost," Leach, *The Ballad Book*, 258 ff.
  2. Wimberly, *op. cit.*, 237.
  3. "Sweet William's Ghost" (77), B, 14, Child, II, 230. See also "Proud Lady Margaret" (47), A, 19, Child, I, 427.



than our text A) marks a clear distinction between the body and the spirit, and makes the ghost explain that he has left his "bones" beyond the sea and that it is only his "spirit" that is speaking to his love.<sup>1</sup> Ramsey's Sweet William finally "evanishes in a cloud of mist," as an airy spirit might do.<sup>2</sup> In our North Carolina text we have noted that they refuse eating the earthly food offered by the mother. This enfeebles the matter-of-factness of the corporeal revenants as did the introduction of the "dream" earlier in the same text. In Scott's version, even though the revenants seem to be leading a "dual existence," no explanation of their real nature is intended. Their paradisaical nature is dramatically presented by the symbolic birch. They eat and drink, and instead of vanishing like Ramsey's William, leave the house with regret. We can almost imagine the sorrow of the mother who, finding the bed empty, feels for the warmth of their bodies still left in it. The concept of the distinction between body and spirit, Wimberly says, does not hold for the revenants of the best ballads. The ghost *is* the corpse. "Of course it should be borne in mind," he says, "that the belief in a bodily revenant may exist alongside the belief in a more immaterial ghost. But the materiality of the ballad revenant is a primitive or early trait, and our songs seem to reflect a period or stage of thought when mankind had not yet grasped the idea of the separation between soul and body or, it is very possible, had not yet conceived the idea of the soul."<sup>3</sup> The tragic pathos of the *Minstrelsy* text arises from the conflict between the mother's confidence in the entire

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1. See the quotation on page 99 above.

2. Ramsey's version, 1740, has the following stanza which Percy regards as "modern":

No more the ghost to Margaret said,  
But, with a grievous groan,  
Evanishd in a cloud of mist,  
And left her all alone. (Child, II, 229, A, 15)

See also Percy, *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, ed. by Wheatley, III, 130-131. The editor suspects that the stanza is probably Ramsey's own.

3. Wimberly, *op. cit.*, 228 f. See also *ibid.*, 101.

existence of her sons and the nothingness which in reality death has brought them to.

The above comparison has illustrated that text A is superior in lyrical and dramatic effect, while D is concise but more detailed as a narrative. Francis J. Child, in praising our *Minstrelsy* text, says as follows: "There is no indication that the sons come back to forbid obstinate grief, as the dead often do. But supplying a motive would add nothing to the impressiveness of these verses. Nothing that we have is more profoundly affecting."<sup>1</sup> Walter M. Hart, in his summary of Child's ideas on balladry, states that in most typically traditional ballads "the story may not be completely told; conclusion, transitions, and preliminaries may be omitted; but the result is not incoherent. At its best it is, however, brief."<sup>2</sup> And Arthur K. Moore remarks on the same subject: "Since none [of the best anthology pieces] is rich in narrative detail and most are positively deficient, the definition of the ballad as a folk song that tells a story is for this group assuredly inadequate, if not misleading . . . . The claim of the ballad to literary merit thus depends to a large extent on pieces which are not, with minor exceptions, pre-eminently narrative."<sup>3</sup>

Many comments have been made upon the later rationalization and moralization of the supernatural theme. In our present ballad we have seen how Christian influence worked upon the paganism that originally prevailed in the poem. In fact Christian elements have a minor place in traditional ballads and this fact is unanimously pointed out by Leach,<sup>4</sup> Wells<sup>5</sup> and Wimberly.<sup>6</sup> It is interesting to note this

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1. Child, II, 238.

2. Hart, *op. cit.*, 806.

3. Moore, *op. cit.*, 9.

4. Leach, *op. cit.*, 11.

5. Wells, *op. cit.*, 176.

6. Wimberly, *op. cit.*, 401.

fact when we think that British culture after the end of the Middle Ages must have been predominated by Christian way of thinking. According to Wimberly it is not that the ballad antedated the introduction of Christianity but that "the best ballads are pagan at heart."<sup>1</sup> He explains that the heathen beliefs of ballad folk are something independent from Christian thought and culture, that Christian elements are intrusive to the ballad but not inherent in it. Another remark concerning this point is made by Wells as follows: "In the slow conversion of Northern Europe the rulers of the countries became Christian often only in name, and for political purposes, and the ensuing baptism of the people themselves was entirely superficial. Indeed, heathen practices continued throughout the middle ages; superstition was rampant in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries."<sup>2</sup>

In the American versions of our ballad, except in the case of fragmentary ones, the name of "Saviour" appears almost invariably, whereas this name is not seen in any of the British texts. May it be due to the historical and environmental factors? The more basic question, however, is what Savior or Christ really meant to those presumably uneducated people whose contact was not with books or cities but with the surrounding nature and with people of a limited community. It is natural that the ballad people tend to become superstitious since they are constantly faced with the cruelties of nature. "Christ" or "Saviour," it seems to me, was for them nothing very much more than a repeated name representing something absolute, and their idea of this Christian image was just as vague as their notion of paradise or heaven. Text D has partly replaced the floating atmosphere of pagan mystery with the specific name of common knowledge, and thus it transformed and stabilized what was originally elusive. This change may also have been motivated by the need for some moral in the story, as Wells suggests: "The good church

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1. Wimberly, *op. cit.*, 401.

2. Wells, *op. cit.*, 176.

members in part of the Appalachians today, who has put away 'devil's ditties' along with whisky, tabacco and coffee, may still indulge in his favorite songs if he moralizes them, so he introduces the Saviour in 'The Wife of Usher's Well.' " <sup>1</sup>

Regarding the form and technique, we see that text A is rich in the use of alliteration. Alliteration is one of the technical characteristics of traditional ballads, as Gummere points out in his *Old English Ballads*.<sup>2</sup> Together with alliteration we have noted the use of incremental repetition, the method of lingering upon certain scenes or incidents through the rhythmical repetition of similar lines. A also shows regularity in rhyme and meter; the rhyme scheme (a b c b) and the alternation of the iambic tetrameter and trimeter are almost constantly kept throughout the poem. The musical effect of these two texts are not in fact easy for us to compare when we do not actually hear them sung to tunes; but when read aloud simply as verses, most people will agree that Child A claims superiority in its auditory effect.

The above analysis leads us to think that a ballad tends to become "less typically ballad"<sup>3</sup> in the course of transmission. It is F. J. Child's theory that a ballad is "essentially lyrical, and its lyrical quality is not less essential than plot."<sup>4</sup> The difference between text A and text D exemplifies the fact that the lyrical-dramatic quality is hard to be retained in the same form. I am not in the position here to decide, however, whether a ballad really degenerates or improves. The above example is only one of the numerous possible cases of alteration. Before coming back to a general discussion, the analysis hitherto made of the two representative texts should be supplemented by the study of other versions available at hand.

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1. Wells, *op. cit.*, 179

2. Gummere, *Old English Ballads*, 305. "It [alliteration] is much more frequent in the older than in the later ballads."

3. Hart, *op. cit.*, 770

4. *Ibid.*, 807.

## British Texts

The second oldest British version is Child B, recorded in Peeblesshire, Scotland, in 1829. This fragment constitutes the closing part (stanzas 18 - 23) of "The Clerk's Twa Sons o' Owsenford" (72, A) in Kinloch MSS. According to Child this originally belonged to "The Wife of Usher's Well" but strayed into "The Clerk's Twa Sons" to give it a revenant ending. It is also considered, on the other hand, that the concluding part of "The Clerk's Twa Sons," due to its climactic nature in pathos and tragic irony, separated and developed itself into an independent ballad which we now have as "The Wife of Usher's Well."

The version starts with the stanza on the sons' return one night during the "hallow days of Yule." This echoes the sixteenth stanza of "The Clerk's Twa Sons" in which the man beguiles his wife saying:

"It's I've putten them to a deeper lair,  
An to a higher schule;  
Yere ain twa sons ill be no here  
Till the hallow days o yule." <sup>1</sup>

The "twa sons," in fact, were sent to "fair Parish" to "learn some unco lair," and were condemned to death by the mayor for their affair with the mayor's daughters.

In the third stanza on bed-making the mother's "mantle" appears as it did in Child A, but in this case the mother clothes her sons in her "gay mantel" instead of wearing it herself. If the "mantle" in this case means "blanket" or "covering," it is closely related to the "golden cover" that appears in the American versions. In the fourth stanza we have a local name called "merry Linkem," the variants of which also appears in "Fair Janet" (64, B, 21) <sup>2</sup> and "Sir Hugh" (155, A, 15 & 16). <sup>3</sup> In the latter the dead son promises his mother to meet her "at the back o merry Lincoln." (In version C, as we have seen, this

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1. Child, II, 175.

2. Child, II, 106.

3. Child, III, 244.

line is changed into "at the birks of Mirryland town.") A stanza from "Sweet William's Ghost" shows a closer resemblance in wording, though it has "merry midd-larf" instead of "merry Linkem":

O cocks are crowing a merry midd-larf,  
A wat the wilde foule boded day;  
The salm of heaven will be sung,  
And ere now I'll be missed away. (B, 8)<sup>1</sup>

According to W. P. Ker the "midd-larf" is the corruption of "middle earth," the world of the living in contrast to the otherworld.<sup>2</sup> Together with the "merry Lincoln" of "Sir Hugh," the "merry Linkem" here seems to represent this earthly world where the day dawns with the crowing of the cock and the routine of life is enjoyed.

Child C from Shropshire was recorded in 1883, under the title, "The Widow Woman." This version is distinguished from others by the Christian influence upon the interpretation of the story. The text begins with the mother's prayer to Jesus to give her sons back to her. Jesus is awakened from sleep and comes to "far Scotland" to answer her prayer. The mother asks him to "put breath in their breast, and clothing on their backs" and send them back to her so that she might take some rest. In order that the sons may come back "in earthly flesh and blood" this Shropshire version suggests the necessity of the reunion of the separated body and spirit. This takes us back to the discussion on the body-soul relationship of the ballad ghost. The ghost in this text is not the mere "breath" or spirit as Sweet William's ghost is considered to be. But it is not the simple corporeal revenant that we see in the *Minstrelsy* version either. It is the reunited form of "breath," "breast," and even "clothing," and here it needs the miraculous power of Jesus to achieve the reunion. The dead, at the same time, is thought to be sleeping in heaven (or possibly in the grave) and Jesus has to "rise" them up in order to restore them to

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1. Child, II, 230.

2. Ker, "On the History of the Ballads, 1100 - 1500," *Form and Style in Poetry*, 13.

life.<sup>1</sup>

As in the versions A and D, here also are stanzas portraying the mother's preparation of food and bed. But the mother makes the supper "so neat, as small as a yew tree leaf," as if to suggest that the mother is already aware of the unearthly nature of the sons. Compare this expression with such lines as "a' my house shall feast tonight" (A) or "O eat and drink, my merry men a' " (B), which indicate that the mother has no doubt whatever about the physical existence of the sons. The cocks crow to announce the daybreak—the red one, the second one (its color unspecified) and the white one—and the oldest son says, "I think it is high time/For the wicked to part from the dead." Compare this again with the restraint and simplicity of expression, "Brother, we must awa" (A). Here it is considered that the dead sons returned to admonish the mother against her sins, to advise her to repent so that she might also rest peacefully in heaven. We saw in the preceding part that with Child D the sons' return is motivated by the mother's excessive grief. Another cause of the disquiet of the dead is the earthly pride of their kin, as we see illustrated in "Proud Lady Margaret" (47) where the dead brother returns to warn his sister of her vanity.<sup>2</sup> The admonition against sin in the present text may be a variation of the same theme.

The sons, instead of bidding farewell, lead their mother through the road to the otherworld, at the end of which they are expecting to meet Jesus waiting for them in a chapel. They proceed through the forest, "along a green road, the greenest ever was seen." Also in "Sweet William's Ghost" the maiden follows her lover's ghost into the green forest:

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1. cf. Wimberly, *op. cit.*, 401. He says this is "a clear case of an attempt at Christian rationalization of a purely pagan story." It may be the Christian interpretation of the Old Norse concept of the rising of the dead from the death-slumber. For this reference see Gummere, *Germanic Origins*, 350.

2. Child, I, 427 ff.

It's hose and shoon and gound alane  
She clame the wall and followed him,  
Until she came to a green forest  
On this she lost sight of him. (B, 11)<sup>1</sup>

The introduction of the green forest here is based on the primitive notion that the forest is regarded as the world of departed souls.<sup>2</sup> Gummere notes the old Germanic custom of planting trees about the graves of great ancestors, which grew into a sacred grove and became the abode of the dead.<sup>3</sup> This may in some way be related to the idea that the dead are transformed into trees, as we often see "rose and brier" growing out of the lovers' graves. The graves are commonly green with plants as illustrated in the last stanza of Child D:

Green grass grows at our head, dear mother,  
Green moss grows at our feet.

This pre-Christian image of the green forest is overlapped with the Christian image of a chapel where Jesus is opening the door for the dead. The images of green forest and white building of lime and stone, it seems to me, are correspondent with the images of graveyard and tombstone. Incidentally, in another version of "Sweet William's Ghost" we find the forest image replaced by that of a churchyard where the grave opens to receive the revenant:

She followed him high, she followed him low,  
Till she came to yon church-yard;  
O there the grave did open up  
And young William he lay down. (C, 10)<sup>4</sup>

"At the gates o paradise," however, the mother is refused to enter for she has "nine days to repent/For the wickeness she has done." This reminds us again of "Proud Lady Margaret." There the sister is refused to follow her brother into the grave:

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1. Child, II, 230.
  2. cf. Wimberly, *op. cit.*, 122.
  3. Gummere, *Germanic Origins*, 314.
  4. Child, II, 231.



“O hold your tongue, Lady Margaret,” he said,  
“Again I hear you lie;  
For ye’ve unwashen hands and ye’ve unwashen feet,  
To gae to clay wi me.” (A, 18)<sup>1</sup>

Nothing is clear about the nature of the mother’s wickedness in Child C; it may be a distant influence from another revenant ballad, “The Cruel Mother” (20), in which the mother is reproached by her babies whom she killed with her own hands. The cruel mother suffers the penalty of four-times seven years of transmigration:

Seven years a fowl in the woods,  
Seven years a fish in the floods.  
  
Seven years to be a churchbell,  
Seven years a porter in hell. (I, 14 & 15)<sup>2</sup>

One might detect some Scandinavian vestige in this Shropshire text. In “Svend Dyring,” also a revenant ballad of Danish origin, the dead mother asks God’s permission before she revisits this earth to comfort her oppresd children.<sup>3</sup> The name of Jesus appears also in “Sir

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1. Child, I, 427.

2. Child, I, 224.

3. This information has been taken from Ker, “On the Danish Ballads,” *Collected Essays of W. P. Ker*, II, 76 f. There he discusses the relation between Danish ballads and the ballads in Romance languages. The lack of materials at hand prevents me from developing discussion on the relation of the present text with ballads of other countries, but the following quotation from Ker must be helpful for our further study: “The ballads of the dead mother’s return to help her children is known to most of the Romance languages in the region described. Generally the southern version have rather different plot from the well-known one of Jamieson’s *Svend Dyring*. There the mother in heaven is grieved by her children’s crying, and comes to the Lord to ask leave to return to middle-earth. In France, and generally in the south, the children go to the graveyard to find their mother; on the way they meet with Jesus Christ, who asks them where they are going, and calls their mother back to take care of them. But in the Piedmontese version, as in *Svend Dyring*, the mother is wakened by the children’s crying at home; and in many Danish variants the children go to the churchyard; “the first grat water, the second grat blood, the third she grat her mother up out of the black earth.”

Ogey and Lady Elsey" ("Aage og Else"), the Danish analogue of "Sweet William's Ghost." There the revenant speaks the name of Jesus to prove the wholesomeness of its nature before being admitted into the lady's chamber:

"Rise then, dear Lady Elsey,  
And open me the door,  
For name I can Lord Jesus,  
As I could do before." <sup>1</sup>

Both "Svend Dyring" and "Sir Ogey" have three cocks to crow—red, white and black—and as Wimberly points out "the colorless 'second' [in the Shropshire text] may correspond to the black cock of the Norse ballads."<sup>2</sup> Child A, by the way, has only two cocks to crow, and so does "Sweet William's Ghost." The rising of the dead and their return to the grave are given a fairly detailed description in Child C. The concept of the world in and beyond the grave is conveyed here through Christian images, but the idea of the grave as the final abode, and its close association with forests and some sort of shrines, seems deeply rooted in old Germanic beliefs.<sup>3</sup> "Sir Ogey," in the same way, has a dual implication of Christianity and paganism: with its full description of the gloomy underworld where the tears of the living fill the coffin with blood and gore, appears at the same time a Christian image of a church as the destined place for the dead to go back to. The corpse-revenant, with a "coffin on his back," "staggers towards the churchyard," across which the church door opens to receive him. And yet the last sight we have of the revenant is the dead man descending into the grave:

. . . slipped to his grave the deadman,  
She saw him not again.

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1. Leach, *op. cit.*, 259.

2. Wimberly, *op. cit.*, 250.

3. cf. Gummere, *op. cit.*, 353 f.

He slipped away, the deadman,  
And down he went below. (31 & 32) <sup>1</sup>

The blending of different narrative elements is seen in two other English versions, the one from Oxfordshire recorded in 1912, and the other from Herefordshire, 1908. Since they are quite similar in structure we shall take the latter for the present analysis.

Nothing special can be said about the opening two stanzas of the Herefordshire text except that they are similar in style to the opening part of Child D and other American versions. The third stanza is interesting when compared with the corresponding stanza in A and D. In Herefordshire text the mother says that she would renounce her belief in man and God if they fail to send the sons back to her. This seems to be reminiscent of the curse she uttered in Child A, and at the same time it shows some similarity to Child D in introducing a Christian image. The stanza which immediately follows is apparently a variant of the corresponding one of Child C. In the sixth stanza the sons refuse to eat saying, "It's so long and many a day, / Since we have been here before." The separation of the living and the dead is here explained in terms of the lapse of time as if to mitigate the poignancy of the cruel truth. The need for some sort of explanation and the hesitation for revealing the truth seem to have combined into these ambiguous words of refusal.

This version has an interesting stanza on the crowing of the cock, which is undoubtedly a drifter from "St. Stephen and Herod" (22) or "The Carnal and the Crane" (55). Both of them tell the story of the miracle of the roasted cock which crew in the dish before King Herod to announce the birth of Christ. The following stanzas are from "St. Stephen and Herod":

King Herod answered thus to him:  
"I'll not believe this story,  
Till the roasted cock that is on the board  
Claps his wings and crows before me."

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1. Leach, *op. cit.*, 261.

The cock he clapped his wings and crew,  
"Our Lord, this is his birthday!"  
Herod fell off from his Kingly seat,  
For grief he fell a swooning. (7 & 8)<sup>1</sup>

"Carnal and the Crane" shows a greater proximity in wording:

The cock soon freshly feathered was,  
By the work of God's own hand,  
And then three fences crowed he,  
In the dish where he did stand. (11)<sup>2</sup>

What prompted the ballad singer to put this incident here may be its association with the feast scene that precedes: "The cloth was spread, the meat put on." Or it may have strayed in here drawn by the mother's speech, "I will not believe in a man . . . Nor in Christ in eternity," which reminds us of the words uttered by King Herod in "St. Stephen." The final stanza on farewell resembles that in Child A though it has half lost its former simplicity. Shedding tears of farewell in the Herefordshire version is nothing more than the corruption of the restrained expression of sorrow in Child A. The tears of the departing here, it is presumed, may in some way be related to the tears for the dead that we see in Child D.

Studying the Shropshire version and the Herefordshire version we see that both of them lack in coherence, that unifying vision which so wonderfully put together the picturesque and climactic scenes in the *Minstrelsy* text. The loss of unity occurs as the memory fades and different interpretations of the singers get blended. Having no other British texts at hand, it is beyond my knowing in what ways these versions were further developed. There is quite a span of time between the *Minstrelsy* version and the Herefordshire one; the period between them covers more than a century in the modern history and this provides an ample reason for the alteration.

The loss of coherence, however, is not the sole outcome of com-

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1. Child, I, 233.

2. Child, II, 8.

munal re-creation. The North Carolina version we studied above, for instance, indicates a way of development different from the ways in which the Shropshire and the Herefordshire texts were developed. The date of writing of our North Carolina text (1896) comes between those of the latter two (1883, 1908), but the former "had long been sung by the 'poor whites'" in the Appalachian mountains. Though it may be inferior in poetic value to the *Minstrelsy* text, it has its own style and the sequence of narrative development. The incidents that constitute the framework of the story are almost invariably repeated in later American texts. The communal re-creation, then, may not work in preserving poetic beauty, but it may function to choose and regulate, retaining only those elements which are acceptable and memorable by the folk. In the space remaining below I intend to make a brief survey of the characteristics of the American texts and see how the folk memory discards the transitory features both of form and of content.

### American Texts

"The Wife of Usher's Well" is widely found in America. The texts were recorded during the first half of this century from Virginia, West Virginia, North Carolina, Kentucky, Florida, Tennessee, Missouri, Mississippi, Nebraska, Indiana, Ohio and Maine. The American versions are very similar to one another as Belden notes: "one suspects some printed source as the explanation of the likeness in the American texts, but I find no mention of such."<sup>1</sup> The resemblance of the texts may be due to the fact that they were assembled within a comparatively short range of time; we have about eighty cases of recording within a little more than fifty years. We should not therefore over-emphasize their similarity in contrast with the case of the British vari-

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1. Belden, *Ballads and Songs Collected by the Missouri Folk-Lore Society*, 55.

ants, for in the latter case we have only five texts scattered over a hundred and ten years.

Setting aside the statistical difference, however, we may venture to say that the American versions have attained certain stability of form, constituting an objective framework of the story which would suffer little from the oral transmission. In the American variants the tendency of development is not into diffuseness but into conciseness.<sup>1</sup> For the convenience of further discussion let me write down an outline of the story dividing it in four parts which are common to Child A, Child D, Herefordshire text, and most of the American versions. We shall see then in what ways those parts are constructed into stanzas in the American variants.

1. There was a woman. She had three sons and she sent them abroad (for study). In a short time the sons die far from home.
2. The mother grieves for the loss and wishes fervently that her sons would come back to her.
3. On the night of Christmas (Martinmas, New Year) the sons come home. The mother busies herself preparing food and bed for them. Despite the mother's warm welcome, however, the sons are bound to return to the place where they came from.
4. The concluding part consists either of a farewell scene or a grave scene, suggesting the fact that the living and the dead, after all, cannot be re-united.

Of the four parts above, part 1 and part 3 constitute the fundamental elements of the story. Even in the very short version from Missouri we see the necessary components of these two parts:

A woman lived in a far country  
And she had children three,  
She sent 'em away to a far off town  
For to learn their grammar.

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1. cf. Coffin, *The British Traditional Ballad in North America*, 3.

They hadn't been gone but a week or two,  
     In fact it was not three,  
 Till death came a-walking o'er the land  
     And took her babes away.  
 It being close to old Christmas time  
     And the nights being long and cold,  
 She dreamt she saw her three little babes  
     Come a-running down the hall.  
 Lay my table white, lay my table fair  
     For my three little babes to dine,  
 Oh mother, we can eat none of your bread,  
     Neither can we drink your wine.  
 We cannot sleep on your golden sheets,  
     Neither eat your bread and wine,  
 For tomorrow morn at eight o'clock  
     With our Savior we must dine.  
 On a frozen pillow we must sleep  
     With the cold clods at our feet,  
 And the tears that you will shed for us  
     Will wet our winding sheet.<sup>1</sup>

This is the sheer outline of the story. The American versions vary in details upon this general framework.

Almost all the American texts have "bread and wine," "white sheet" and "golden spread" for part 3, as they have "northern land," "grammar," and "sickness (or death) come sweeping by" for part 1. The children are urged to leave because the "Savior" is waiting for them in heaven. The crowing of the cock appears in approximately one third of the American texts, but they almost invariably have the "Savior" image together with it, as we see in the following:

"Take it off, take it off," says the eldest one,  
     "The cocks they will soon crow;  
 For yonder stands our Savior dear,  
     And to him we must go."<sup>2</sup>

The image of the cocks survives in the folk memory, but the reference

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1. Randolph, *Ozark Folksongs*, I, 123. Also in Bronson, *op. cit.*, 251.

2. Kittredge, "The Wife of Usher's Well," I, "Children's Song," stanza 9; *JAF*, (30), 306.

to their colors is omitted; there is not a single text in the Bronson collection that mentions the color of the cock. The old magical implication of the red, white and black cocks is ignored in the American versions, and this is probably because of the introduction of the Christian image which is just as important and which has gradually come to supersede the primitive concept.

Parts 2 and 4 are more susceptible to change. These parts are sometimes even omitted as we see in the short Missouri version above, from which part 2 is totally excluded. (They may be, on the other hand, expanded by the addition of explanatory lines or by the intrusion from other ballads, which is illustrated by the fourth and eighth stanzas of Herefordshire version.) The predominant pattern for part 2 is exemplified by the third stanza of Child D. Sometimes the mother's grief and wish are more emphasized as in the following:

And when she came this to know,  
She wrung her hands full sore,  
Saying, "Alas! alas! what shall I do,  
I shall never see my sons any more.

"Isn't there a King in Heaven above  
Who used to wear a crown?  
I pray the Lord will me reward,  
And send my three little babes down."<sup>1</sup>

The concluding part of the American versions have in most cases the description of the underworld, with the folk belief that the tears for the dead disturb their rest in the grave, as illustrated by the following:

"Cold clay, cold clay, hangs over my head,  
Green grass grows under my feet,  
And every tear that you shed for me,  
Does wet our winding sheet."<sup>2</sup>

In the concluding part we sometimes see the sons' remonstrance upon the sinfulness of human pride:

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1. Davis, *More Traditional Ballads of Virginia*, 168, EE, 3 & 4.
  2. *Ibid.*, EE, 10.



She spread a downy bed for them,  
And on it she spread clean sheets;  
And on it she spread a golden spread,  
That they might for the better sleep.

"Take it off, take it off," the oldest said,  
"Tis vanity and sin;  
And woe, woe be to this wicked world,  
Since pride has so entered in!"<sup>1</sup>

We remember that in the Shropshire version the mother had to repent for the wickedness she had done. "Wickedness," "vanity," "pride" and "sin" are all drifters that stray in and out of American texts. Sometimes the mother's own pride is considered to be the cause of the sons' death:

"Dear mother, dear mother, it's the fruit of your poor pride heart  
That caused us to lie in the clay.  
Cold clods at our heads, green grass at our feet,  
We are wrapped in our winding-sheet."<sup>2</sup>

In Barry's version the "downy bed" with "clean sheets" and "golden spread" is regarded as a sign of vanity and sin. Is it then considered an act of pride in Sharp's version to send the sons abroad to "learn their grammery"? In the *Minstrelsy* version there is no explanation of the reason for the sons' death; their death is an inevitable consequence and nothing can be blamed for it except for the cruel ways of the universe. Its untimeliness and its lack of any justification thus make us realize the vanity of human wishes and the struggle against the power of fate. To re-interpret the story in terms of cause and effect simply enfeebles its tragic significance.

In the American texts the verbal alterations occur without affecting the basic pattern or style of writing. "Grammeree" is in some versions corrupted into "granerlee," "grammercy," "grammar free," "grammar three," "grammar through" and "grammar school." Natural-

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1. Barry, *British Ballads from Maine*, 449, A, 7 & 8.

2. Sharp and Karpeles, *English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians*, I, 152, B, 8.

ly enough "swift death" and "sweet death" alternate, as do "cold death" and "old death." The following is to illustrate the variation of the opening stanzas :

- (1) There was a lady, a fair lady,  
And she had fair children three ;  
She sent them away to the North country,  
To be taught their grammaree.  
They'd been gone but a short time,  
About three weeks and a day,  
Then death, swift death, came hastening along,  
And took those pretty ones away. <sup>1</sup>
- (2) There was a woman lived in Ardell,  
And babies, she had three ;  
She sent them away to the North country  
To learn their granerlee.  
They had not been gone two week -  
I am sure it was not three -  
Till old grim Death come knocking at the door,  
And tuck these babies away. <sup>2</sup>

Judging in terms of literary merit there is little or nothing to choose between them. It is interesting to compare the above pair of texts with another pair that follows, and see the difference in the way of variation :

- (3) Once there was an old woman,  
And very wealthy was she ;  
She had three great big boys,  
And sent them over the sea.  
They had only been gone a week from her,  
A week, not more than three,  
When word came to that old woman,  
That her sons she'd never see. <sup>3</sup>
- (4) There lived a wife at Usher's Well,  
And wealthy wife was she,  
She had three stout and stalwart sons,

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1. Barry, *op. cit.*, 449, A, 1 & 2.

2. *JAF*L, (44), 1931, 63.

3. Cox, *Folk-Songs of the South*, 93, E, 1 & 2.

And sent them o'er the sea.

They hadna been a week from her,  
A week but barely ane,  
Whan word came to the carline wife,  
That her three sons were gane.

The passage (3) is from Cox, *Folk-Songs of the South*, and only these two stanzas are recorded for this version. The line by line equivalence with the text that follows indicates the fact that it has derived directly from the *Minstrelsy* version. If we consider the verbal changes only, the difference between (3) and (4) is no greater than that between (1) and (2). In spite of the shifts in words, passages (1) and (2) do not sound very different. However, we can tell between (3) and (4) that the latter must be the original and the former its paraphrase. There is not very much lost or gained between (1) and (2); but something that distinguishes (4) is half lost in (3). That "something" is what we call poetic value.

The passages (1) and (2) both represent the style in which the American texts are written. The American variants have attained a sort of uniformity in style as well as in structure. The individual colors fade in the course of transmission, but there emerges instead a style of writing which is more durable. The *Minstrelsy* version has the singleness of vision that gives unity to it, and that poetic vision must have been of an individual although the singer's personal traits are totally hidden behind the work. The American texts, instead, have common words or set phrases around which the verses are constructed. The *Minstrelsy* text and the North Carolina text are both characterized by their objective and impersonal way of treating the narrative subject; and yet the former is considered to be the product of an individual, while the latter seems to have developed through the workings of the ballad community.

Leach writes in his *Ballad Book* that "in general, time is not kind to ballads in either England or America, for by and large the ballad

tends to degenerate.”<sup>1</sup> This is what we have seen throughout the foregoing analyses. The nineteenth century, moreover, was certainly not the best time for preserving the oral tradition in its original simplicity. Leach continues to remark as follows:

The folk of the past two hundred years are not the folk of Sir Walter's time. Some seem to think that the more illiterate and "hillbillyish" the folk are, the finer will be their ballad product. This is not true; the best ballads are found not among the uneducated and vulgar but among people of intelligence and taste. Ballads degenerate only when those who have them in their keeping degenerate. One incapable of appreciating the power and tragedy of "The Three Ravens" is likely to make it buffoonery or not sing it at all. It is people like Mrs. Brown of Falkland from whom the best ballads come, both in the eighteenth century and in the twentieth. Unfortunately few Mrs. Browns of the twentieth century know ballads.<sup>2</sup>

Leach, however, suggests another possible process of re-creation. He says that in oral transmission

more and more explanatory detail is dropped; singers subconsciously are led to forget such material in favor of dramatic and climactic elements. So ballads become less meaningful, more skeltonized, until in some instances little is left but outline. Often, however, this process results in an improved ballad by focusing on the climax of the action, and bringing more comprehension and unity of effect. This tendency can go on until most if not all of the story elements are eliminated, leaving only the lyrical elements that are kept alive by the music.<sup>3</sup>

But I think we have to be lucky enough to have some sort of an inspired singer to get an improved ballad out of a skeltonized one. Perhaps this was the process which preceded the birth of our *Minstrelsy* version. The original core of our oldest version may simply have been the final and the most pathetic part of "The Clerk's Twa Sons o Owsenford." But we do not have any evidence to give the definite answer. One might predict that from one of our American versions a new ballad may be born which has charm and simplicity equal to that of our oldest version. That, however, is not likely to occur in the present century.

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1. Leach. *The Ballad Book*, 40.

2. *Ibid.*, 41.

3. *Ibid.*, 39.

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