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**Raggedy Heroes:**  
**James Whitcomb Riley's Portraits of the Poor in**  
**"The Raggedy Man," "Little Orphant Annie," and "Griggsby's Station"\***

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Independent Scholar

Though the poetry of Indiana poet James Whitcomb Riley (1849-1916) is not much read today, at the time of his death in 1916 he was one of the most popular poets in the United States (see Robertson 14, 24). When he lay in state in the Indianapolis Statehouse, an honor previously accorded only to Abraham Lincoln, over 35,000 people came to pay their respects and "Riley Days" that celebrated his poetry were instituted in schools across the nation.<sup>1</sup> Riley's body of work comprises roughly one thousand poems in a variety of styles, but he made his reputation with short lyric poems written from the perspective – and in the dialect – of rustic Midwestern characters, often farmers with little education, or children. The fact that his adult characters were also "infantilized (crippled, subliterate, or 'raggedy') rural white adults" emphasizes the similarity between his child characters and those who were treated as childlike when viewed from a middle-class perspective (Sorby 101).<sup>2</sup> As Nadia Nurhussein observes, Riley's use of nonstandard

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<sup>1</sup> The first Riley Day was proclaimed by the Governor of Indiana in 1912. By 1915 the celebration was national. While the celebration was soon discontinued in other states, it continued in Indiana until 1968 (Van Allen 259).

<sup>2</sup> Sorby also notes that these performances partake of "strategies of condescension" as defined by Pierre Bourdieu: "those strategies by which agents who occupy a higher position in one of the hierarchies of objective space symbolically deny the social space between themselves and others, a distance which does not thereby cease to exist, thus reaping the profits granted to a purely symbolic denegation of distance" (Bourdieu qtd. in Sorby 114).

spellings to evoke the speech of illiterate characters actually implies a highly literate audience, since it requires familiarity with correct spellings to be able to make sense of and appreciate the humor in these “mistakes” (11). Particularly in their use of apparently illiterate child speakers, and often explicitly thematizing the topic of learning to read and write, such poems

prompt readers to revisit childhood, when a reader is typically most aware of his or her efforts to process writing, with all of the attendant struggles, but to retain in the end the ability to move easily between oral and literate modes. (Nurhussein 11)

Thus while many of his most popular poems were described by Riley as *Rhymes of Childhood* (the title of his popular collection of 1891), they are not really children’s poems, but intended rather for readers and listeners who nostalgically revisit childhood from an adult vantage point.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, when he performed his poetry on the stage – Riley indeed first came to the attention of a national audience outside of his home state of Indiana by performing on the lecture circuit with the likes of Bill Nye and Mark Twain – he addressed primarily middle-class listeners who could afford tickets to lectures and concerts and were interested in the cultural capital of such events (Sorby speaks of his “enormous middlebrow following” [100]). Yet the personae he employed both in these performances and in the printed versions of his poems were very often lower-class characters, albeit viewed from a middle-class perspective.

In the following, I wish to examine a few poems that foreground working-class or poor characters<sup>4</sup> and consider the functions of such portrayals within the overall trajectory of each text.

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<sup>3</sup> While Riley’s poems were also extensively read and memorized in schools, the poems used for this purpose, as Nadia Nurhussein observes, were not representative of his most famous work. The poems anthologized for classroom use were “most often less dialectal than the best known of his verses; that is, the dialect used is relatively intelligible and not visually intrusive” (26). Of the twenty-six textbooks and anthologies she examines (from 1889-1935), only five include “Little Orphant Annie,” “The Raggedy Man,” or both, with the majority focusing instead on poems written in Standard English (see table 1 on pp. 27-28).

<sup>4</sup> The terms “poor” and “working-class” are of course not synonyms, though they often seem interchangeable in everyday usage. The term “poverty” emphasizes a material lack, though this lack may also affect diverse areas of life that extend beyond the material, such as access to education and other forms of cultural capital, and it can be used to

Riley's poems often portray lower-class characters as part of a sentimental representation of small-town Midwestern community life, presenting figures such as "Little Orphant Annie" or "The Raggedy Man" as loveable family retainers, while glossing over the very real difficulties of their lives. This is part of a nostalgic portrait of small-town farming communities that was extremely popular in the 1880s and 1890s as a reaction against industrialization and urbanization in line with other forms of local color writing in the same period.<sup>5</sup> However, upon closer examination Riley's poems actually do more than just romanticize the poor as picturesque figures. Read carefully, they can also be shown to acknowledge the hardships of the poor, as the analysis of the 1885 poem "Griggsby's Station" will show. It praises rural poverty at the expense of big-city wealth, but it does so ironically, also pointing out some of the challenges faced by the rural poor. I thus argue that there is a double-voicedness to Riley's portraits of the poor, the uneducated, and children: They are dramatized for the benefit of middle-class, educated adult readers and listeners, partaking of pastoral nostalgia and serving as a source of humor, but they may also ironically undercut that very sentimentality by subtly reminding readers of the class realities they might prefer to ignore.

The irony frequently resides in the tension between different understandings of the poems' intermediality. Some may interpret dialect features simply as local color. I suggest that they can also be understood as subverting any unequivocal readings of regionally inflected language. If we regard dialect as attached to spoken language/oral performance *and* to the fact that selected poems present child speakers whose sense of verbal semantics relies mostly on what they hear and see

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describe individual circumstances, which may change over time. By contrast, assignments of class imply a more static system that extends beyond the singular individual or moment. The poems "Little Orphant Annie" and "The Raggedy Man" focus on what can be identified as working-class or even underclass characters, specifically domestic servants, as viewed from a middle-class perspective, while "Griggsby's Station" refers explicitly to the experience of poverty as a circumstance that may be reversed. As Dorothy Wedderburn observes, however, poverty has often been used as a means of indirectly addressing the problem of social inequality, as I believe Riley also does in his poems (Wedderburn 2). I will return to this point when discussing "Griggsby's Station," below.

<sup>5</sup> Robertson argues that Riley "gave his own generation and the succeeding one a feeling of security" (16) and was read as contributing to the formation of "a distinctive culture" (16) in Indiana.

rather than read, a case can be made for discussing dialect and orality as distinct from written, printed, Standard-English poems as two different media (even though the dialect poems were, of course, also widely distributed in print). The ostensible middle-class urban reader, then, occupies a separate social space and positionality which makes this medial difference discernible and functional.

I will first discuss two of Riley's best-known characters, Little Orphant Annie and The Raggedy Man. Poems featuring these characters include the strategic use of dialect as a means of expressing the subjective experience of social cohesion. Furthermore, storytelling prowess produces appreciation of lower-class characters within the poems, while also inviting an ironic chuckle that Riley shares with his middle-class readers. Whereas this section of the analysis foregrounds Little Orphant Annie and The Raggedy Man as working-class characters, the following section will address poverty as a romanticized memory and upward social mobility as discomfoting. In closing, I will point out how Riley's ambivalent representation of the working poor and of poverty-stricken rural environments is echoed in the ambivalence of the medial juxtaposition of the oral and the written.

### **“Little Orphant Annie” and “The Raggedy Man”**

First published under the title “The Elf Child” in the *Indianapolis Journal* in 1885 and renamed “Little Orphant Annie” upon republication (in the 1886 collection *The Boss Girl*<sup>6</sup>), “Little Orphant Annie” would become one of Riley's signature poems to make use of a dialect-speaking child persona. The “Annie” of the title is not herself the narrator of the poem, but another child who can be read as a younger avatar for the poet because of his similarities to many other child speakers,

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<sup>6</sup> In determining dates of first publication and republication in various Riley collections, I have consulted Russo and Russo's comprehensive bibliography of Riley's work.

some of whom are identified as “Jim” (for example in “The Man in the Moon,” 1883). Yet Annie is herself a storyteller, and the poem’s speaker describes her and the ghost stories she would tell in the evenings, after her work is done. Annie labors in the household because she is an orphan who has come to the speaker’s house not adopted as a child among children, but as a servant who is expected to “make the fire, an’ bake the bread, an’ earn her board-an’-keep”. This social difference between the male speaker and the titular character is foregrounded much less than the shared storytelling; at the same time, Annie is noticeably set apart from the more privileged children in terms of class and in terms of her role as an oral narrator who awes her own age group with scary tales. But the child speaker loves the “witch-tales” Annie tells of “Gobble-uns ‘at gits you / Ef you / Don’t / Watch / Out!”:

Little Orphant Annie’s come to our house to stay,  
 An’ wash the cups an’ saucers up, an’ brush the crumbs away,  
 An’ shoo the chickens off the porch, an’ dust the hearth, an’ sweep,  
 An’ make the fire, an’ bake the bread, an’ earn her board-an’-keep;  
 An’ all us other children, when the supper-things is done,  
 We set around the kitchen fire an’ has the mostest fun  
 A-list’nin’ to the witch-tales ‘at Annie tells about,  
 An’ the Gobble-uns ‘at gits you  
     Ef you  
         Don’t  
             Watch  
                 Out! (Riley, *The Complete Poetical Works* 370)

The stories that follow in stanzas two and three are classic cautionary tales, warning children against bad behavior (especially the failure to say one’s prayers or to show respect towards one’s elders) and the poem concludes with an overtly didactic plea for good behavior and charity towards “the pore and needy ones ‘at clusters all about” (Riley, *The Complete Poetical Works* 371). Thus, Annie ironically occupies an adult-like position of moral instruction through her stories and her potentially awe-inspiring drawing out of the final warning, as indicated in the line breaks (which,

presumably, indicate dramatic emphases and pauses) and the placement of the last four lines in the above-quoted stanza. At the same time, altruism towards individuals like her constitutes the center of the admonitions.

Similarly, the hired man at the center of “The Raggedy Man” (1890) is presented from a boy’s perspective as a loveable figure who is, among other things, a great playmate and entertainer, not least because of the fantastical and nonsensical stories he tells:<sup>7</sup>

O The Raggedy Man! He works fer Pa;  
An’ he’s the goodest man ever you saw!  
He comes to our house every day,  
An’ waters the horses, an’ feeds ‘em hay;  
An’ he opens the shed – an’ we all ist laugh  
When he drives out our little old wobble-y calf;  
An’ nen – ef our hired girl says he can –  
He milks the cow fer ‘Lizabuth Ann. –  
    Ain’t he a’ awful good Raggedy Man?  
        Raggedy! Raggedy! Raggedy Man!  
[...]  
An’ The Raggedy Man, he knows most rhymes,  
An’ tells ‘em, ef I be good, sometimes:  
Knows ‘bout Giunts, an’ Griffuns, an’ Elves,  
An’ the Squidgicum-Squees ‘at swallows the’rselves:  
An’, wite by the pump in our pasture-lot,  
He showed me the hole ‘at the Wunks is got,  
‘At lives ‘way deep in the ground, an’ can  
Turn into me, er’ Lizabuth Ann!  
Er Ma, er Pa, er The Raggedy Man!  
    Ain’t he a funny old Raggedy Man?  
        Raggedy! Raggedy! Raggedy Man!  
(Riley, *The Complete Poetical Works* 462-63, stanzas 1, 5)

As in Annie’s case, the ‘goodness’ resides both in the Raggedy Man’s practical service on the farm and in the laughs and feel-good wonder he inspires through his oral storytelling.

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<sup>7</sup> On Riley’s use of nonsense, see Petermann.

There are several angles from which these poems (and others like them) can be examined. For example, they are typical of Riley's use of "Hoosier" dialect from Indiana, for which he was renowned. In contrast to dialect poems such as "When the Frost Is on the Punkin" or "The Old Swimmin'-Hole" that are presented as the lyrical expressions of rustic farmer characters (adults), where the dialect serves both as a marker of local authenticity and sentimental nostalgia for what is perceived as a simpler agrarian life (see Robertson 18-19), these poems both use *child* dialect speakers. Here, too, the dialect was perceived by contemporary audiences and critics as authentic.<sup>8</sup> But the fact that Riley was speaking in the voice of a child meant that an additional layer of distance was added between the implied author and the poems' speaker. Of course, the rustic farmer was also a persona Riley assumed, despite his own middle-class upbringing and distance from the farming life per se, a distance that also applied to his largely middle-class audiences. Riley was praised by contemporary reviewers for his ability to absorb characters, to convincingly become the character he was performing (Bush 40). Mark Twain's essay "How to Tell a Story" prominently cites Riley as an example of the consummate teller of humorous stories precisely for this ability to tell a story in the persona of characters such as "a dull-witted old farmer" (7).

In poems like "Little Orphant Annie" and "The Raggedy Man," the additional characteristic of the speaker's young age meant that the non-identity of poet and speaker was even clearer. This allowed for ironic winks between Riley and the audience at the expense of the child speaker, such as when "The Raggedy Man" concludes with the child speaker stating his intention to grow up to be a Raggedy Man himself, rather than a "rich merchunt" like his father (Riley, *The Complete*

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<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., letters from Charles Philips, editor of the Kokomo *Tribune*, such as this one of June 14, 1879: "You are the best dialect man in the country [...]. You're going to have a run through the press over these latest dialectic efforts. The good newspaper boys are bound to 'whoop you up!'" (n.p.) and another from of July 8, 1879: "Your dialectic sonnet is best of all. I agree with Mrs. C. that you are now working in the very 'classics of dialect,' and with this vein in you, I wonder that you have not touched it before. It has a responsive echo in every human with a soul in him, and I predict that this last will be copied in the press from Maine to California" (Philips n.p.; underlining original))



*Poetical Works* 464). The child is able to ignore class distinctions in a way that the poem presents both nostalgically and humorously. As Sorby argues:

The fantasy of Riley's performances, then, is the fantasy of controlled release, a kind of 'recess' where power relationships can be playfully overturned so that the Raggedy Man gets the gold and 'rich merchants' are less respectable than hired hands. But this fantasy is also a joke – Riley was first and foremost a humorist – and as a joke it defuses (while airing) any class anxiety that the specter of a man in rags may arouse. A child can admire a 'Raggedy Man,' and imbue him with an aura of power and glamour, because a child has no real power to defend; likewise, an adult playing the part of a child can also play at collapsing hierarchies – not to challenge them, but ultimately to maintain them. (Sorby 114)

Being in cahoots with the implied author thus allows audiences simultaneously to long for a supposedly simpler time when they, as children, could afford to be ignorant of class constraints and also laugh at the child's ignorance.

Riley's strategy constitutes a case of "reflective nostalgia," to use Svetlana Boym's term, as it does not aim to restore a previous state in conservative or reactionary fashion but provokes reflection on loss while indirectly acknowledging the impossibility of such a return (xviii). Boym explains her distinction between restorative and reflective nostalgia as follows:

Restorative nostalgia stresses *nostos* and attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home. Reflective nostalgia thrives in *algia*, the longing itself, and delays the homecoming – wistfully, ironically, desperately. Restorative nostalgia does not think of itself as nostalgia, but rather as truth and tradition. Reflective nostalgia dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity. Restorative nostalgia protects the absolute truth, while reflective nostalgia calls it into doubt. (xviii)

The thoughtfulness of Boym's "reflective nostalgia" resembles what Jennifer Ladino calls "counter-nostalgia," as it creatively employs nostalgia to challenge a particular narrative by literary means. Ladino explains counter-nostalgia as follows:

Much nostalgia is characterized by totalizing metanarratives of return that posit coherent origins as points on a progressive timeline leading to the present day. Its purpose is to justify the present and to stabilize history. Counter-nostalgia, however, does something quite different. Nostalgia becomes ‘counter-’ when it is strategically deployed to challenge a progressivist ethos. Counter-nostalgia depends upon a tactical reappropriation of more dominant strands of nostalgia through creative, often literary, means. (14-15)

I argue that “The Raggedy Man” (like other poems I will discuss in the following) does not merely gloss over realistic details of hardships faced by the working poor to focus on a sentimental and nostalgic image of a supposedly simpler life but also acknowledges them in order to provoke a reflection on class differences. Because this is done in a very subtle manner, it is possible for audiences to read these poems in different ways, either as sentimental and non-threatening nostalgia (presumably the most common reaction both among contemporary audiences and later critics) or as pointing to class tensions in a subtle and sometimes ironic way. This latter possibility is why I read these poems as encompassing not merely restorative nostalgia but also its reflective or counter-nostalgic flip side, in which a nostalgic representation of the past invites reflection on the ambivalences inherent in such a portrait.

In “Little Orphant Annie” and “The Raggedy Man,” for example, the initial impression of these two working-class characters is likely to be that of the loyal family retainer, a trope that aims to excuse any problems in their treatment by suggesting they are happy with their lot and love the family they serve (also a typical strategy in portraits of slaves and black domestic servants, epitomized by the “Mammy” figure).<sup>9</sup> Though one could imagine that Annie in fact lives a hard life as an orphan expected to work for her room and board rather than enjoying the privileges of the other children around her, her suffering is not actually portrayed, which helps to maintain a fiction that this exploitation of child labor is somehow also in *her* best interest and not just that of

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<sup>9</sup> On the figure of the loyal family retainer, see Jordan 84. On the “Mammy” figure as a portrait of black slaves and domestic servants, see May 286.

her employers who, at the same time, figure as a class difference–inflected variant of an adoptive family.

However, both poems do begin with rather detailed lists of the work these characters do, showing that while the child speaker may not question them or fully acknowledge them, he – and certainly the implied author – is aware of distinctions between these working members of the household and his own more privileged position as child of the house. Little Orphant Annie is clearly a servant, and as such is responsible for cleaning, baking, tending the fire, and numerous other tasks. While the speaker is most interested in her as an entertainer, it also becomes clear that she does not actually have time to tell stories until after “the supper-things is done,” which follows a lengthy list of her chores around the house as quoted above (Riley, *The Complete Poetical Works* 370).

Similarly, the Raggedy Man, as a hired farm hand, has a number of responsibilities, such as feeding and watering the horses and tending to the cows. Though some of these chores are listed initially, the boy speaker nonetheless seems to think he has copious free time, as he describes himself helping others with their tasks (“milks the cow for Lizabuth Ann”), finding time to climb trees and shake down apples for the children or to make “a little bow-n-orry fer me,” not to mention his games and stories that are discussed in more detail in the other stanzas (Riley, *The Complete Poetical Works* 462, 464). In each case, this reflects the perspective of the privileged child speaker, who is at leisure to play and may ignore the work responsibilities of the hired help, as he assumes they are primarily there for his own entertainment.

In his essay “Domestic Servants and the Victorian Home,” John O. Jordan explains how servants were seen as threatening the Victorian image of the ideal middle-class home (as

influentially laid out in John Ruskin's 1865 lecture "Of Queens' Gardens") by bringing in "anxieties" and "divisions," including:

differences in class, differences in political and economic power, differences in social horizon and subjective experience – these are among the potentially disruptive qualities that the presence of servants risks introducing into the middle-class home. As a result, servants must either be effaced from the scene altogether, along with all traces of their labor, or else be represented as harmoniously at one with it. (Jordan 80)

Of these two options for reconciling domestic servants with the Victorian ideal image of the home – making them invisible or presenting them as in harmony with their domestic surroundings – Riley's poems focus on the latter. He does not ignore the presence of servants or the labor they do but actually puts them in the foreground in several poems. He does, however, frequently cast them as happy and uncomplicated supports of the family, as "old family retainer" types, as Orwell said of Dickens's sympathetic servant characters (Orwell qtd. in Jordan 84). I bring up Dickens's portraits of servant characters because Jordan's discussion of these figures offers an important parallel to Riley's similar characters. While Orwell argued that "for Dickens, as for most Victorians, a world without servants was unthinkable and [...], given this fact, the best he could do was to endorse the only tolerable form of servitude imaginable, namely the feudal" (Orwell qtd. in Jordan 84), Jordan objects that Dickens's servant characters do in fact expose some contradictions in this system and are given some scope for subversive behavior (84).

Likewise, Riley's portraits of hard-working orphans and hired men can also be seen as sharing this ambivalence. While there are elements of the happy-go-lucky type about the Raggedy Man, in particular, and he tends to be seen through the eyes of a middle-class (child) character, he is also given a voice of his own. Several of Riley's other poems – "Grandfather Squeers" (1880), "The Lugubrious Whing-Whang" (1881), and "The Man in the Moon" (1883) – were retroactively framed as stories that the Raggedy Man tells to a child listener, with the bulk of each poem in his

own voice.<sup>10</sup> The speaker in “The Raggedy Man” only actually quotes his idol directly in the last stanza, but the content of that brief speech is telling:

The Raggedy Man – one time, when he  
Wuz makin’ a little bow-’n’-orry fer me,  
Says “When you’re big like your Pa is,  
Air *you* go’ to keep a fine store like his –  
An’ be a rich merchunt – an’ wear fine clothes? –  
Er what *air* you go’ to be, goodness knows?”  
An’ nen he laughed at ’Lizabuth Ann,  
An’ I says “’M go’ to be a Raggedy Man! –  
I’m ist go’ to be a nice Raggedy Man!”  
Raggedy! Raggedy! Raggedy Man! (Riley, *The Complete Poetical Works* 464)

In this passage the hired man directly confronts the child with questions of class. The child ignores such distinctions, as he is still free to construct his image of the world based on his limited experience. A middle-class child is not forced to confront the real responsibilities and challenges of the working poor. The Raggedy Man, however, – like the implied author and his audience – is clearly very much aware of them. The middle-class audiences of Riley’s performance of these pieces and his middle-class readers would have the opportunity to identify themselves with this child speaker and his view of such servant characters. This identification on the one hand partakes of a simplistic restorative nostalgia for a supposedly simpler rural past, as well as for the untroubled times of childhood play. Yet because these audiences must also recognize their distance in age

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<sup>10</sup> See for example the opening stanzas of two of Riley’s nonsense poems, “The Lugubrious Whing-Whang,” which is framed as “the rhyme of the Raggedy Man’s ‘at’s best,” and “The Man in the Moon” (Riley, *The Complete Poetical Works* 449-50, 282-83). While the collected version of these poems in each case includes the dramatization of the Raggedy Man’s storytelling, the fact that “The Raggedy Man” itself was not published until Dec. 1890 (in *Century Magazine*) suggests that this framing may have been added to less popular poems as a way of marketing them to an audience enthralled with the figure of the Raggedy Man. In the case of “The Lugubrious Whing-Whang,” this is certainly the case. On its first publication in 1881 in the *Indianapolis Journal*, first labeled as “AH-HAH!,” the poem consisted only of the final three stanzas (see Riley, “AH-HAH!”). The first two stanzas about the Raggedy Man telling this “rhyme” were added for its publication in *Rhymes of Childhood*, 1891, a collection that also reprinted “The Raggedy Man” and other poems featuring this character, “The Man in the Moon,” “Grandfather Squeers,” and “Our Hired Girl.”

from these child speakers, they are also forced to acknowledge the immaturity of such a view and perhaps come to question their own class privilege.

Importantly, the middle-class child speaker and the working-class characters' dialect are of one piece in "Little Orphant Annie" and "The Raggedy Man." Adults from the speakers' context are not heard at all. The poems thus leave it open as to whether nostalgic readers inside or outside Hoosier culture may perceive a reflection of their own linguistic and rural selfhood in the poems. This openness, produced through the implied duality of oral versus written, dialect versus Standard English, allows – as demonstrated – the ironic understanding between implied author and implied reader.

### **"Griggsby's Station"**

A poem that thematizes poverty (as well as questions of overcoming or appreciating its ostensible benefits in terms of human connectedness and social cohesion) more explicitly than "Little Orphant Annie" or "The Raggedy Man" is "Griggsby's Station," first published in 1885.<sup>11</sup> The first titles of the poem used on its publication in newspapers – "Back Where They Used to Be" and "Back to Griggsby's" – emphasize the element of return, suggesting the poem will be a nostalgic longing for a place of rose-colored memory. Certainly that is the dominant tone of the poem, though even a moderately close examination shows that the content of the poem complicates this nostalgia and ironically undercuts it.

Pap's got his pattent-right, and rich as all creation;  
But where's the peace and comfort that we all had before?  
Le's go a-visitin' back to Griggsby's Station –  
Back where we ust to be so happy and so pore!

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<sup>11</sup> This poem first appeared as "Back Where They Used To Be" in the *Indianapolis Journal* on May 17, 1885, then as "Back to Griggsby's" in *Judge* on Sept. 5, 1885, and was reprinted with its final title "Griggsby's Station" in the collection *Afterwhiles* of 1888 (Russo and Russo 17).

The likes of us a-livin' here! It's jes' a mortal pity  
To see us in this great big house, with cyarpets on the stairs,  
And the pump right in the kitchen! And the city! city! city! –  
And nothin' but the city all around us ever'wheres!

Climb clean above the roof and look from the steeple,  
And never see a robin, nor a beech or ellow tree!  
And right here in ear-shot of at least a thousan' people,  
And none that neighbors with us or we want to go and see!  
(Riley, *The Complete Poetical Works* 348-49)

These first three of a total of ten quatrains establish the basic premise of longing for a simpler life, a life that is marked temporally as the past. Additionally, this distinction is spatial, as the village of Griggsby's Station<sup>12</sup> is opposed to the city, and the speaker longs to physically go to the place associated with that happiness. The reason for the move to the city is a change in economic fortunes, as the family is now "rich as all creation," which contrasts sharply with how "pore" they used to be back in Griggsby's Station. Consequently, the two places are opposed in terms of comfort. The comparatively basic nature of these material comforts that are presented as astonishing new luxuries, as implied by the many exclamation points, would surely have been a source of humor for middle-class audiences well used to such amenities. The city offers new luxuries – "cyarpets on the stairs, / And the pump right in the kitchen!" In contrast, the speaker misses "the peace and comfort that we all had before," thus mixing a mental state ("peace") with an ambiguous, unspecific reference to feeling at home. This classic opposition between material and spiritual comforts that seeks to make excuses for physical poverty by claiming spiritual wealth,

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<sup>12</sup> I have not been able to identify an actual village or town by this name, so it seems to be Riley's invention. It could perhaps be read as an avatar for Riley's hometown of Greenfield, Indiana, which in 1880 had a population of 2,013 people ("Table III" 150). Likewise, while the city mentioned may well be Indianapolis, the largest city in Indiana, it is kept anonymous, which surely aided not only the allegorical potential of the opposition between rural and city life but also the marketability of this poem outside of its author's home region. Interestingly, there is today a popular restaurant called Griggsby's Station in Greenfield, Indiana, which was named after this poem. The restaurant's website states: "Griggsby's Station is named after a poem by notable Greenfield poet James Whitcomb Riley. We like to think that Riley would've made Griggsby's Station a nightly stop just down the street from his house" (*Griggsby's Station*).

an ideal made even more explicit in Riley's poem "The Poor Man's Wealth." In that case, the speaker refuses to be pitied for his lack of gold or property, claiming instead the company of Nature, and a "wealth of thanks," "patience and content," and "A wealth of charity for those // who pity me my ragged clothes" (Riley, *The Complete Poetical Works* 295).

"Griggsby's Station" also claims the proximity to Nature as an advantage of poverty, a distinction that is aided by the spatial assignation of poverty and wealth to the small town and the city, respectively. While one might expect the urban environment to pale in contrast to the natural abundance of rural life (the speaker bemoans the lack of birds and trees in the city), the two locations also differ in terms of community and social relations, which are portrayed as sorely lacking in the city, despite having "at least a thousan' people" within earshot. In Griggsby's Station, "the latch-string's a-hangin' from the door, / And ever' neighbour round the place is dear as a relation" (Riley, *The Complete Poetical Works* 349). Indeed, the following stanzas will single out particular neighbors the speaker misses, as she<sup>13</sup> expresses her desire to hear their news and either laugh or cry with them. This human connection seems to be completely lacking in the city.

The anecdotes about former neighbors provide the speaker with an opportunity to flesh out her portrait of poor village life with some details. She speaks of pleasant activities such as friends who would drive up from "Shallor Ford" to visit on Sundays, or of the "Jones girls" and their quilting and "Marindy" with her sewing, but also of visiting a grave and crying with friends over

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<sup>13</sup> I regard the speaker as female, though there is no explicit identification of this figure or her gender. I base this assumption on the fact that the speaker refers primarily to female neighbors she would like to gossip with and help with their sewing, which are occupations connoted as traditionally feminine rather than masculine. This is rather surprising, since Riley's poems most often tend to take a male perspective (either adult or child). Another possibility is to regard this as, again, a child speaker, who would spend more time in the house and thus with the women of the household than the men who are out working the fields. That the speaker wishes to "pester" Laury about her beau does indeed indicate a certain childishness in his or her character. The use of dialect, however, should not necessarily be taken as a marker of the speaker's youth, as numerous poems in the voice of adult rustic characters also are written in dialect, such as the well-known "The Old Swimmin' Hole" and "When the Frost Is on the Punkin" (Riley, *The Complete Poetical Works* 245-46, 254-55).



the letters from a young man who died in “The War” (presumably the American Civil War). There are at least two deaths referenced in stanzas eight and nine, which seem to directly contradict the claim in stanza seven that “they’s nothin’ aggervatin’ any more, / Shet away safe in the woods around the old location” (Riley, *The Complete Poetical Works* 349). The woods do not keep this community safe, as its young men have still been called off to war and larger conflicts have intruded into their supposedly safe space. Similarly, financial concerns are present, though the speaker’s impulse is to laugh them off:

I want to see the piece-quilts the Jones girls is makin’;  
And I want to pester Laury ‘bout their freckled hired hand,  
And joke her ‘bout the widower she come purt’ nigh a-takin’,  
Till her Pap got his pension ‘lowed in time to save his land.  
(Riley, *The Complete Poetical Works* 349)

While it may be fun to tease Laury about a suitor, it is less humorous to realize that her choice of husband was very nearly dictated by financial anxiety. The brief mention of her father’s pension also suggests that he was very likely a Civil War veteran who is unable to work due to disability. While the first private pension plan in the United States was established as early as 1875 (The American Express Company), pensions in the late nineteenth century were primarily for disabled veterans and their widows. While American veteran pensions would eventually be converted into old-age plans, all pensions except for commissioned officers were originally disability plans. The first army retirement plans were only instituted in 1885 and applied to individuals who had completed 30 years of military service (Craig n.p.). According to the Georgetown University Law Center, in the late nineteenth century “roughly 75 percent of all males over age 65 are working. If a male over age 65 is not working, it is likely because he is disabled,” and by 1899 only 13 private pensions had been established (1). Details like these show Riley’s keen awareness that things were not in fact much better when they “were so happy and so pore.” On the contrary, this cliché is

made ridiculous by drawing attention to all the grievances they faced, perhaps also gently mocking Riley's comfortable middle-class city audiences who might themselves be tempted to admire the proverbial greener grass of rural farming communities. Thus, "Griggsby's Station" also produces instances of "counter-nostalgia" (as defined by Ladino) and "reflective nostalgia" (as defined by Boym). As the speaker does not express any intention of returning to this location to live (as quoted above, it is a matter of "go[ing] a-visitin'" and of "want[ing] to see" in order to "joke" with the locals), the poem's speaker behaves in a manner that implies the safe position of the person who made it out of the village and who can afford to romanticize poverty from the safe distance of an economically more secure position.

At the same time, the reversal of the family's fortunes through what seems to be an unexpected success with a patent, coupled with the fantasy of returning both in space and time from a condition of wealth to one of poverty, draws attention to the precarity of that new-found wealth. If they can suddenly gain riches, they can presumably lose them just as easily. The accompanying change in class status is also complicated here. On the one hand, the poem might seem to illustrate social mobility, with the possibility of moving up in status from the precarious life of a poor farming family to the middle-class status of a successful inventor and presumably businessman. On the other hand, the speaker's discomfort with his new circumstances suggests that he has not in fact been welcomed into a more affluent and leisured class, or that he does not feel an affinity for the accompanying lifestyle, instead longing to return to the more familiar working-class life he has left behind.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, I argue that Riley's portraits of the working poor are characterized by ambivalence. While they romanticize poor and working-class characters as natural storytellers and happy-go-

lucky symbols of a simpler rural life, they do also express awareness of class and the struggles of the poor. The former function, of course, serves to conceal the latter, such that readers and audiences could enjoy these poems as simple expressions of sentimental nostalgia, but it is still the case that class critique is taking place, however subtly. Angela Sorby observes that:

Little Orphant Annie, the Raggedy Man, and the 'Old Sweetheart' can all be seen as guards patrolling the boundaries of the middle class: they are figures of power shake-ups, jokes, inversions, and surprises, but they are also instantly recognizable as part of an act, reinforcing the very social boundaries that they transgress. Orphant Annie brought 'gobble-uns' of poverty and class and perhaps even racial anxiety to the surface, but she was popular because – as a child addressing other children – she contained them as well. (Sorby 120-21)

This is the reverse view of the ambivalence that I have discussed – I claim that Riley romanticizes the poor but does also subtly raise awareness of their situation, while Sorby argues that he draws attention to such class anxieties only to contain them. Perhaps we do not have to choose which is dominant; these poems can in fact do both and while they were popular because the class issues they raised were presented as harmless, this safe quality also allowed them to subversively draw attention to issues of class that would otherwise not have reached such a large audience. Whether that audience actually took notice of these elements is of course another question.

As shown, Riley's dialect poems highlight the inherent intermedial features of poetry by directing attention to sonic and performative characteristics, both in the storyworld within the poems and potentially in the experience of listening and seeing these poems as performances. The acts of listening to poetry as distinct from reading poetry seem to be located in separate contexts defined by differences in age, class, regional and local, as well as rural and urban contexts. Research on popular poetry can profit in multiple ways from incorporating the perspectives of poverty studies and intermediality. As the analysis of Riley's poems has demonstrated, this combination of vantage points fosters a nuanced understanding of representations and

conceptualizations of ‘the poor’ and ‘the working class.’ Such nuances reside, among other things, in considering nostalgic and ironic reading practices as well as an understanding of poetry as voiced/sounded words and read/printed words. While orality-focused readings of poems about poverty offer inroads to interpretations that seek to avoid clichés, the downsides of focusing on dialect as the central feature of a poet’s work are also well-known in American literary historiography and criticism. As Riley’s contemporary Paul Laurence Dunbar knew only too well, the popularity of his dialect poetry harbored the danger of reductive understandings of his broader artistic goals. On the one hand, Dunbar’s dialect poems about the antebellum period and about African American characters have been beloved poems within African American communities ever since the 1890s. On the other hand, privileging his dialect poems at the expense of his ‘Standard English’ poems threatened to lock Dunbar and his African American readers in the restrictive conceptualizations that white people had (and may still have) of African American self-expression. An analogous predicament can apply to dialect poetry that represents regionally and locally focused, working-class or poor characters. Thus, in-depth research on linkages between the intermedial features of dialect poetry and the depiction of the working poor offers alternatives to reductive readings.

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