

Introduction – The Early Years

Ambrose Bierce didn't rise to writing fame in quite the same glory as Edgar Allen Poe, but in many ways his writing style and story telling was no less compelling. Bierce left his mark in history during this time period as a journalist, humorist, satirist, and editor. He developed his character, credentials and influence through his writing. He is best known for his Civil War short stories and his very own 'Devil's Dictionary'. The unique elements of Bierce's writing provided not only entertainment, but also information. Through his writing he was able to share his opinions in an influential way which gave him both prestige and power.

Ambrose Bierce was born on a farm, the tenth child of thirteen children, all with names beginning with 'A', in Elkart, Ohio .It appears that Bierce the writer and Bierce the man were consciously developed by him through a series of half truths. What is known about Ambrose Bierce is more what he wanted you to know. With his fame came the scrutiny of his critics. He earned the reputation of being known as Bitter Bierce, and his critics could be harsh. Walter Neale's book about the Ambrose Bierce's life is a tribute to the author through the eyes of a friend. Even Neale has difficulty reconciling the many contradictions surrounding the truth about Ambrose Bierce. Neale writes after researching Bierce's early life, "It is now clear to me why Bierce misrepresented his early life. He was ashamed of his lowly estate while in Elkhart (Neale, p39)."

Ambrose Bierce repeatedly told Neale the story of his early life saying that “he was born on a farm in the Western Reserve, in Ohio, and had there remained until he was about seventeen, when he tired of farm life, ran away from home, to Chicago, and had there engaged in free-lance work for newspapers until he enlisted in the Union Army at the outbreak of the Civil War.” With great pride he would continue that “he came from an old New England family, cultured, and of local distinction. From New England his grandsires, of English extraction, had migrated to Ohio, where he was born, in Meigs County, June 24, 1842 (Neale, p 33)”. This Neale was to discover was a half truth for though his family did hail from New England and gentry, Ambrose was born on a farm and worked the farm as any other farmer would. He did not run away to Chicago to work for a newspaper. One townsman from Elkhart confided in Neale, after Ambrose’s death, his recollection of Ambrose’s youth.

“The boy had what was called a ‘poor chance’. He quit school early and went to work in the brickyards. He ‘graduated’ there in due time, and came downtown to work. Andrew Faber was running an establishment on Main Street in those days, a bakery-grocery-restaurant-saloon, and he took Ambrose on as all around handy man. When the boys got together upstairs to play cards to see who’d treat, it was Ambrose Bierce who brought the beer and sandwiches upstairs.

“Then Fort Sumter was fired on, and Elkhart was aflame with patriotism. Young fellows enlisted faster than they could be equipped and mobilized, and young Bierce was among the very first. He joined Co.C, the 9th Indiana Infantry.

“Then he gave his friends their first surprise. The army seemed to bring out in young Ambrose things that had never been seen in Elkart. His education had been neglected, and he was always rather queer and different. But the first thing I knew he was a commissioned officer on the staff of General W. E. Grose, in the Army of the Cumberland. As a topographical engineer Bierce served throughout the war, with great distinction (Neale, p 37).”

Class Discussion

One of the difficulties in teaching history education to middle school students is making relevant connections to keep them interested and prevent them from establishing the opinion that history is about a bunch of dead people or seemingly irrelevant events that they don't care about. If they are going to learn about history, aspire to be about more than their beginnings, Ambrose's early life has left open many discussion points to lure students into the past by connecting the present. Discussion questions might include: Why did Ambrose lie (even to his friends)?, Could he have lied today and still become successful? Do you think there are things in your childhood you will not share or you will change when you are older?

The Civil War

Ambrose joined the Civil War as a Union private but quickly rose in his service to become a topographical engineer. He fought in many famous Civil War battles, Shiloh, Chickamauga and Missionary Ridge to name a few. .

In 1864 he was severely wounded in the head by a confederate bullet which landed him in the hospital for several months. He suffered long term headaches, dizziness and sometimes would black out from this injury and eventually he was forced to resign from the service. He took a job making maps of Indian country and when he finally reached San Francisco, he made it his home.

Adult Published Career

Bierce moved to England with his wife where he rose to fame as a satirist. After moving back to the states he published Tales of Soldiers and Civilians and received great reviews. He went on to publish a collection of supernatural stories as well from short stories he wrote from a newspaper.

The Loves of Ambrose Bierce

Ambrose Bierce was an attractive man who woman solicited company from. He had numerous affairs and relationships throughout his lifetime. Yet, most of the women he chose to award his true favor upon were plain and unremarkable. In his late teens, Ambrose met his first mistress who was seventy years old. Far into his later years Ambrose referred back to her as someone he truly loved. Ambrose did not actually believe in the institution of marriage as he thought that by biological design, men were programmed to seek out more than one mate. Monogamy came to men only later in life. As one might suppose, this mindset Despite this, he married an attractive woman from a reputable family and they had three children; Day, Leigh and Helen. Though his sons grew into promising adults, their lives were short lived. Day was killed in a duel over a woman and Leigh died of typhoid while working at a newspaper. His marriage eventually fell apart it is surmised mostly because of Bierce's confession of infidelity. The couple separated but Ambrose vowed not to divorce his wife. Eventually, he changed his mind and filed for divorce. Two months later Mrs. Bierce passed away. During the time he was separated, Bierce met another woman, thirty two years younger. He referred to Carrie Christiansen as his 'ugly duckling' or his secretary. The extent of their relationship has not been confirmed despite gossip and conjecture. However, even though their relationship/friendship was broken off, Carrie received benefits from the contents of a joint safe deposit box after Ambrose's disappearance.

Mystery of his Death

According to Neale, Ambrose had always planned to end his own life before he became infirm. He contends that Ambrose's disappearance in his early seventy's was the way Ambrose always intended to end his life, and claims Bierce told him that he had found the spot where he would end it. Another possibility being circulated was that he was fighting in the Mexican War and was executed by a firing squad. His body has ever been found so the how and when of his demise may always remain a mystery.

For Middle School Students Grade 7/8

Fables/Satire & the Devil's Dictionary

The Man with No Enemies

An Inoffensive Person walking in a public place was assaulted by a Stranger with a Club, and severely beaten.

When the Stranger with a Club was brought to trial, the complainant said to the Judge:

“I do not know why I was assaulted. I have not an enemy in the world.”

“That,” said the defendant, “is why I struck him.”

“Let the prisoner be discharged,” said the Judge. “A man who has no enemies has no friends. The courts are not for such.”

Teaching Humor

The Failure of Hope and Wandel

Teaching Mystery

The Thing

One Summer Night

Teaching Short Story

“War is God’s way of teaching American’s Geography”

- Ambrose Bierce

Teaching Civil War History – and the surprise ending

The Occurrence at Owl Creek

A Horseman in the Sky

The Story of Conscience

The Battle of Chickamauga

Reflection:

Ambrose Bierce was an amazing writer. I spent the summer reading his work and was consistently amazed at Bierce's ability to say so much in so few words. His short stories about the Civil War seem to bring snap shot moments to life. The heart wrenching experiences of soldiers, ordinary people and even children move the reader to feel the characters emotions. As I began to research Ambrose Bierce the man, I learned he was opinionated, prejudiced, insecure in his past, but confident in his work. He had strong beliefs, and craved prestige. He fought in the Civil War as a young man, and may have died in the Mexican war early in his seventies. He learned to use language and hone his skill through hard work and fortitude. The essence of Ambrose Bierce embodies the characteristics of a 'self made man.

Despite my enjoyment of the writer's work, I was concerned about how I could incorporate his type of writing into my classroom. Since I teach middle school, most of Bierce's writing is much higher than the majority of my student's reading level. So I began to look for stories, fables etc that might appeal to the age level. There is no better way to teach the 'surprise ending' than reading The Occurrence at Owl Creek. I would simply remove the last line of the story before reading whole group with my students. Students could be asked to predict the ending. I would guess that few would surmise that poor Farquar was dead. Not only is the story a great literature tool, it could evoke so much class discussion surrounding duty, death, family, love and what one believes is important enough to die for. This is equally true of A Horseman in the Sky and The Battle of Chickamauga. The experiences Bierce incurred during this time period were the

source of his Civil War short stories. These stories are essential classroom reading for teaching Civil War history. They give life to the sentiments and conditions of the war, and with their twists and turns engage students in both history and language. Though some of the vocabulary is difficult in these stories, it is not overly so. I would recommend introducing the vocabulary before reading.

Citations

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