

The Fierce Mr. Bierce

The Civil War Stories of Ambrose Bierce

Mary J. (Mimi Butts)

Box 1455

Wellfleet, MA 02667

In The Devil's Dictionary, Ambrose Bierce defines Man as "An animal so lost in rapturous contemplation of what he thinks he is as to overlook what he indubitably ought to be. His chief occupation is extermination of other animals and his own species..." This belief is the bedrock of most of Bierce's Civil War stories. Unlike Stephen Crane, author of The Red Badge of Courage, Bierce actually served in the War, enlisting in the Union army at age 19 after spending two years at the Kentucky Military Institute. He served from 1862 to 1865 with several short interruptions, one to recover from a severe head wound. He held the rank of lieutenant and worked as a topographical engineer, providing vital information for troop movement and positioning. He saw action at Shiloh, Chickamauga, Lookout Mountain, Missionary Ridge and Kennesaw Mountain. And, he witnessed the brutality of war, seeing families torn asunder and watching friends die in the horrific slaughter of "the first modern war" (Bruce Catton). Bierce published his first book of short stories entitled *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians* in 1891. In the most famous story from this collection, "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge", Bierce explores the gap between romanticized war and its shocking reality. While his stories can be ironic and blackly humorous, Bierce's anguish about the human cost of war is a theme that permeates all of his civil war writing.

In "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge", Peyton Farquhar is a civilian who longs for "the larger life of the soldier, the opportunity for distinction." (Dover, 35). A gray-clad soldier riding past his plantation tells him the Yanks are at Owl Creek bridge and that the bridge "is now dry and would burn like tow." (36) The reader is told that the gray-clad soldier is really a Federal scout, setting up a foreboding for what immediately comes to pass. Farquhar is captured and sentenced to be hanged on Owl Creek bridge. But, it seems as if the rope breaks and Farquhar falls into the creek, making a wild escape, pursued by Yankee gunfire. His actions are heroic and the reader cheers on his efforts as he tries to return home. But, like the sudden snap of the noose, the last sentence tells the reader "Peyton Farquhar was dead; his body, with a broken neck, swung gently from side to side beneath the timbers of the Owl Creek bridge." (40) Huh?

At the heart of this story is deception, the deception of the Federal scout and of Farquhar's split second delusion that he could evade his captors by running through a surrealistic landscape toward home. Bierce does a pretty good job of deceiving the reader as well. The reality is that this civilian has fallen into a Federal trap before achieving his goal (and distinction), has been hanged and dies immediately on a little-known bridge somewhere in Alabama, and that his wife is now a widow. It isn't surprising that *The Twilight Zone* chose this as one of its episodes.

Another brutal example of illusion versus reality occurs in "Chickamauga". In this story the first sentence establishes a sense of foreboding, "One sunny autumn afternoon a child strayed away from its rude home in a small field and entered a forest unobserved." This child's father had been a soldier and loved military books. From observing the pictures, the six-year-old had

fashioned himself a wooden sword which he now carried with him to fight off imaginary foes. But, because he is only six, he gets lost and falls asleep. When he awakens, he stumbles upon real soldiers in unfamiliar dress who “crept upon their hands and knees” ...”maimed and bleeding” (43) from battle. He climbs on the back of one soldier, as if to play horsie, but the soldier, whose face “lacked a lower jaw” (43), throws him off. The child runs but returns later to lead these men with his wooden sword toward a fire in the distance, still playing soldier. When he arrives at the burning building, he realizes that it is his home and that his mother lies dead with her “long dark hair in tangles and full of clotted blood.” The reader recoils in horror because, while the illusion of a young boy playing soldier seems harmless, the reality of war is anything but. Bierce gets his point across by hitting you in the gut.

Another of Bierce’s themes is the devastation war wreaks on families. The Civil War is also known as the Brothers’ War. In “A Horseman in the Sky”, a young western Virginian, Carter Druse, tells his father he’s going to join the Union army. His father replies, “Well, go, sir, and whatever may occur do what you conceive to be your duty. Virginia, to which you are a traitor, must get on without you.” (28) Druse becomes a sentinel, falls asleep on duty but, awakened by “some invisible messenger of fate”, sees a Confederate mounted on a horse, looking like a “noble work of art”. Behind him are other soldiers and horses that “appeared of heroic, almost colossal, size.” (29) Druse realizes his duty is to shoot the Rebel commander but he cannot bring himself to do so. Instead he shoots the horse but, because they are so close to the edge of a cliff, horse and rider plummet to their death. The Confederate is Druse’s father. In “The Mocking-bird”, Union soldier William Grayrock unknowingly shoots his brother, Confederate John Grayrock. And, most gruesomely (and unbelievably), in “The Affair at Coulter’s Notch”, Captain Colter is ordered by an unfeeling and possibly sadistic general to fire on his own home, killing his wife and infant child. War is hell on families.

Ambrose Bierce has been called “Bitter Bierce” and deemed a fatalist. He could have written the lines that appear in “King Lear”, Act 4, Scene 1:

As flies to wanton boys are we to th’ gods, they kill us for their sport.

In Bierce’s universe, man has little control over what happens to him, even though he thinks he does. This is particularly evident in “One of the Missing”. There is a long passage about the inevitability of Private Searing’s death. As abridged, it reads:

But it was decreed from the beginning of time that Private Searing was not to murder anybody that bright summer morning, nor was the Confederate retreat to be announced by him. For countless ages events had been so matching themselves together in that wondrous mosaic...that the acts which he had in will would have marred the harmony of the pattern. Some twenty-five years previously the Power charged with the execution of the work according

to the design had provided against that mischance by causing the birth of a certain male child in a little village at the foot of the Carpathian Mountains, had carefully reared it...and in due time made it an officer of artillery. By the concurrence of an infinite number of favoring influences and their preponderance over an infinite number of opposing ones, this officer of the artillery had been made to commit a breach of discipline and flee from his native country to avoid punishment. He had been directed to New Orleans (instead of New York), where a recruiting officer awaited him on the wharf. He was enlisted and promoted, and things were so ordered that he now commanded a Confederate battery some two miles along the line from where Jerome Searing, the Federal scout, stood cocking his rifle. Nothing had been neglected—at every step in the progress of both these men’s lives, and in the lives of their contemporaries and ancestors, and in the lives of the contemporaries of their ancestors, the right thing had been done to bring about the desired result.

In Bruce Catton’s essay on the Civil War being the first modern war, he indicates that one of the characteristics of modern war is the fact that men no longer control it; it controls men. Certainly no one predicted, at the beginning of the War, the wanton slaughter it would become. So, “Private Searing” and 600,000 others met their deaths during the four years of a war that changed the fate of our country.

Ambrose Bierce also finds ironic humor in the absurdity of war. In “Jupiter Doke, Brigadier General”, the title character is a coward, an incompetent, a self-serving idiot. Yet, he becomes a brigadier general and hero when twenty-three hundred mules stampede up the road and run down the Confederate forces. This is a tall tale in the vein of Mark Twain, a contemporary of Bierce. It is as funny as Bierce gets but still shows that quirks of fate rather than the deeds of men control our lives. In a small way, it is the 19th century’s Catch-22.

Women do not fare well in Bierce’s stories. This is no surprise considering his definition of *female* in The Devil’s Dictionary is “One of the opposing, or unfair, sex.” In a number of the stories, the women are Confederates or they are nameless victims or they are unfaithful. In one case, however, a woman is carelessly evil. In “Killed at Resaca”, a soldier, Lieutenant Brayle, is foolishly heroic. He survives against great odds but eventually his luck runs out and he is killed in battle. The narrator of the story had found among Brayle’s papers a love letter from a lady in San Francisco which stated “I could bear to hear of my soldier lover’s death, but not of his cowardice.” Bierce writes, “These were the words which on that sunny afternoon, in a distant region, had slain a hundred men. Is woman weak?” (67) The narrator locates the woman to return the letter but she grimaces at the blood stain and throws the letter into the fire. He finds her a “detestable creature” (68) and denies her the satisfaction of Brayle’s heroic death, telling her instead that he died of a snake bite. Even in his non-fiction memoir “What I Saw of Shiloh”, Bierce finds a woman at the front as out of place as an elephant or a hippo. Her

job was to inspire the men with courage, to help them remember why they were fighting. Bierce did say he took his hat off to “this little fool.” (5)

In another memoir, “A Bivouac of the Dead”, Bierce presents a softer side of himself. This essay is really a plea to give fallen Confederate soldiers the honor of a decent burial. In the vicinity of Cheat Mountain, West Virginia, Bierce’s troop and some Confederates met in a reconnaissance that left about a dozen dead on each side. The Union soldiers were properly buried and honored but the Confederates were buried in shallow depressions and forgotten. Bierce writes,

“They were honest and courageous foemen, having little in common with the political madmen who persuaded them to their doom and the literary bearers of false witness in the aftertime. ...Among them is no member of the Southern Historical Society. Their valor was not the fury of the non-combatant; they have no voice in the thunder of the civilians and the shouting....Give them, these blameless gentlemen, their rightful part in all the pomp that fills the circuit of the summer hills.”

There are many reasons why I think these stories would be good to use in my A.P. U.S. history classroom. To begin with, they are very readable and are relatively short so that we could do one in class. I would also like to assign different stories to groups of students and then engage in a storytelling session. The stories have a strong feel of “you are there” because Bierce was a topographical engineer and could convey a sense of the lay of the land. In one story, he describes how the dry leaves on the ground often caught fire during battles and how wounded soldiers might roast to death before they could be rescued. Or, in “The Coup de Grace”, he explains that wild pigs often roamed the woods and would feed on the bodies of dead soldiers. This is not information you will find in a history textbook. In teaching, it is occasionally necessary to get away from rational analysis and synthesis and to experience, as much as we can through the distance of time, the blood, sweat and tears of pivotal events.

Another benefit of reading these stories is that later we can compare them to Tim O’Brien’s The Things They Carried. Many students think that Americans wrote uncritically about war until Vietnam. Bierce disproves that notion. Both Bierce and O’Brien give a real sense of the fear war engenders. In “One of the Missing”, Searing dies of fright; “Parker Adderson, Philosopher” ceases to philosophize when death stares him in the face. In “The Ghost Soldiers”, Tim O’Brien writes of Vietnam,

“It was ghost country, and Charlie Cong was the main ghost. The way he came out at night. How you never really saw him, just thought you did. Almost magical—appearing, disappearing. He could blend with the land, changing form, becoming trees and grass. He could levitate. He could fly. He could pass through barbed wire and melt away like ice and creep up on you without sound or footsteps. He was scary. In the daylight, maybe, you didn’t believe in this stuff. You laughed it off. You made jokes. But at night you turned into a believer: no skeptics in foxholes.” (O’Brien, 202)

Fighting in unknown territory in the South, Bierce could certainly relate to this. In “What I Saw of Shiloh”, he writes:

“Occasionally, against the glare behind the trees, could be seen moving black figures, singularly distinct but apparently no longer than a thumb. They seemed to me ludicrously like the figures of demons in old allegorical prints of hell.” (4)

During his life, Bierce had witnessed hell in the Civil War and had his own set of demons. His fierce criticism of man’s follies made him enemies, both professional and personal. In 1904, he was divorced from his wife (who died a year later) and estranged from his daughter. One of his sons was shot and killed and another died from alcoholism. Alone and in his 70’s, Bierce left San Francisco, where he had written for Hearst’s *Examiner*, to make a final tour of his old Civil War battlefields. On his return trip, he detoured to Mexico and witnessed the Mexican Revolution as an observer of Pancho Villa’s army. Then he disappeared; and no trace of his remains was ever found. Bierce’s life and mysterious death had all the makings of a novel and, in fact, influenced Carlos Fuentes to write The Old Gringo. In this book, Fuentes characterizes Bierce as a remorseful and worn out man who has come to Mexico to die. And he chooses to die during war, the one event that had fired his imagination ever since the Civil War. This idea is actually expressed by Bierce in the final paragraph of “What I Saw of Shiloh”.

“Is it not strange that the phantoms of a blood-stained period have so airy a grace and look with so tender eyes?—that I recall with difficulty the danger and death and horrors of the time, and without effort all that was gracious and picturesque? Ah, Youth, there is no such wizard as thou! Give me but one touch of thine artist hand upon the dull canvas of the Present; gild for but one moment the drear and somber scenes of today, and I will willingly surrender an other life than the one that I should have thrown away at Shiloh.” (17)

Addendum (A quick literary evaluation of Bierce's Civil War stories)

On the positive side, Ambrose Bierce's stories convey a coherent philosophy of moral outrage at what he perceives as man's condition, either self-generated or caused by an outside force. Even after one hundred years, his writing style does not seem dated and, in some cases, appears to anticipate the surrealism of some modern writing. His stories are well-paced and he can create such strong verbal images that you feel as if you see what he sees. In "One Kind of Officer" Bierce writes:

"Captain Ransome sat motionless and silent on horseback. A few yards away his men were standing at their guns. Somewhere-everywhere within a few miles—were a hundred thousand men, friends and enemies. Yet he was alone. The mist had isolated him as completely as if he had been in the heart of a desert. His world was a few square yards of wet and trampled earth about the feet of his horse. His comrades in that ghostly domain were invisible and inaudible."

On the negative side, Bierce relies too much on coincidence in his stories which can give them a contrived feeling. At times, his use of irony seems heavy-handed. He can also employ a bit of melodrama that takes away from the incisiveness that characterizes his best writing. For example, in "The Affair at Coulter's Notch", Captain Coulter never tells his commanding officer ahead of time that the house he's ordered to fire upon is his and contains his wife and child. He carries out the order and destroys his home and family. Bierce writes:

"The dead woman clasped in her arms a dead babe. Both were clasped in the arms of the man, pressed against his breast, against his lips. There was blood in the hair of the woman; there was blood in the hair of the man. A yard away...lay an infant's foot."

In summation, though Bierce's Civil War stories occasionally exhibit some dated conventions (coincidence and melodrama), they are an unflinching window on individuals in the throes of the Civil War. As such, they are eminently worth reading and teaching.

Works Cited

(1842-1914), Ambrose Bierce. "Devil's Dictionary - A - Ambrose Bierce - American Writer - 1842-1914." Books & Literature Classics. 17 Aug. 2009
<<http://classiclit.about.com/library/bl-etexts/abierce/bl-abierce-a.htm?terms=commercial+property+appraisal>>.

Bierce, Ambrose. Civil War Stories (Dover Thrift Editions). New York: Dover Publications, 1994.

Bierce, Ambrose. Shadows of Blue & Gray: The Civil War Writings of Ambrose Bierce. New York: Forge Books, 2003.

Fuentes, Carlos. THE OLD GRINGO. New York: Harper & Row, 1985.

O'Brien, Tim. The Things They Carried. New York City: Broadway, 1998.

Created at www.bibme.org

[Go to CCC TAH Web Site](#)

