4-1-1939

Ambrose Bierce

Walter Richardson Hudgins

AMBROSE BIERCE

by

W. R. Hudgins,

A. B., University of Richmond, 1938

Submitted to the Graduate School

of the University of Richmond in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

Richmond, Virginia

1939

PREFACE

This thesis is an appreciation and interpretation of Ambrose Bierce, "the one genuine wit America has produced." The word interpretation is used with reservations, for it would be impossible to apply the term with any degree of finality to a person who admitted that he understood little about himself. He is appreciated for his wit and satire which cut through shams and hypocrsicies with the acute penetrating force of a dentists' drill. He is admired for his ability to see things "as they were and not as they should have been," and for his courage in parading his unsavory convictions before a disinterested public.

W. R. H.

CHAPTER I

Biographical Sketch

Ambrose Bierce was born at Pomery, Miggs County (1), Ohio, on June 25, 1842. His father was Marcus Aurelius Bierce, a poor farmer of somewhat erratic tastes. His mother was Laura Sherwood, about whom almost nothing is known. Of the union twelve children were born. Two died

---

1. It has been said, without substantiation, that Bierce was born in Guernsey County, Ohio. He set the matter to rights with characteristic neatness when he sent a newspaper clipping to an inquiring correspondent:

> "In Guernsey County, Ohio, more than half a century ago, there is said to have been a heavy shower of stones that caused many to believe that the world was coming to an end."

Bierce's comment was:

> "I fancy that this is what gave your friend the impression that I once lived in Guersey County, Ohio. He assumed that when God was throwing stones, I would be the natural target."

Ruth Guthrie Harding, "Mr. Boythorn-Bierce," Bookman, August, 1925. p. 640

in infancy. To each of the others a name was given beginning with A: Ambrose, Albert, Andrew, Augustus, Aurelius, Addison, Abigail, Almeda, Ann, and Amelia.

When Ambrose was very young, his family moved to Elkhart, Indiana, where, with the exception of Ambrose and possibly Albert, the family lived out their lives in comparative obscurity. Albert ("Old Grizzly"), a favorite brother of Ambrose, went to San Francisco where he obtained work in the mint. It was he who later persuaded Ambrose to take up permanent residence on the west coast.

The early life of Ambrose Bierce was hard and full of grim trials.(2) According to all available information, which at best is only fragmentary and incomplete, Bierce's formal education was sadly neglected. He did, however, develop his literary tastes by reading all of the books in his father's library, which, surprising as it may seem, was

---

2. If one accepts Dr. De Castro's observation, Bierce's early hardships are not so regrettable.

> "It was well that it was so, for it gave us Abraham Lincoln and it gave us James Garfield and Ambrose Bierce."

De Castro, Portrait of Ambrose Bierce, p. 5.

But the statement, like most others by Dr. De Castro, need not be taken fully at its face value. He lacked sincerity, often substituting for it mere fulsome verbiage.

rather large and contained many excellent works. When still a small boy, he went to work in a local brick yard. But this proved distasteful after a time, and he came into town to work in a saloon run by one Andrew Faber.(3)

It is hard to find dependable information about Bierce's life from the time he began working in the saloon until he entered the Union army for service in the War Between the States.

> "He entered the ranks at La Porte, Indiana, on September 5, 1861, and became a member of Company C of the Ninth Indiana Infantry. He was mustered out, with the rank of first lieutenant, at Huntsville, Louisiana on February 16, 1865." (4)

When he entered the army, he gave printing as his occupation. Where he learned this trade, it is hard to say, for he was only eighteen years and nine months old when he registered for service.

The war did much for Bierce. He entered the ranks as an unlettered farm boy, and was mustered out mature in every respect, and possessed of a burning desire to become a

---

3. Elkhart, "Truth," [in] American Mercury, July, 1925, p. 22. vol. 5
4. Grattan, Bitter Bierce, p. 15.

writer. It is doubtful that the major issues of the war held any particular interest for him. He was interested in war primarily as a science.(5) To him it was the science of savagery and sordidness, liberally infused with gross stupidity. None of the reputed glory of war, held by misguided souls, or its pathos, or its human interest, for that matter, seemed to have any effect on him. War to him was merely the means by which certain ends were to be realized, death and suffering being merely incidental in this greatest of all human farces.

Early in his career in the army he was given a position on the staff of General W.B. Hazen as topographical engineer. It is extremely doubtful that he had any special technical training to equip him for such work. But it is not unusual to brush aside such incidentals in time of war. His was a dangerous task and entailed many hazardous exploits. While serving in this capacity, he took part in seven major engagements.

At Kenesaw Mountain he was wounded severely in the head, for which he was forced to remain at home several weeks.

---

5. "It [war] appeared to him as a sort of magnificent reducto ad absurdum of all romance."

H.L. Mencken, Prejudices, Sixth Series, p. 261.

According to Albert Bierce,[6] Ambrose was never the same after this incident. As if some of the iron from the shell had remained in his brain, he became bitter and remorseful, and afterward was inclined to be suspicious of everyone, especially his closest friends.

When the war was over, Bierce had a hard time making up his mind what he wanted to do. Ultimately, of course, he wanted to be a writer.

His first position was with the Treasury Department, where he served as collector of "Captured and Abandoned Property." Several months later he took a position as engineer attache to General Hazen, with whom he travelled on the west coast, in pretense of inspecting fortifications. His duty was to make himself as comfortable as possible, so long as he made no one else uncomfortable.

In apparent dudgeon in San Francisco he resigned, since the officials were so inconsiderate as to make him only a Second Lieutenant in the regular army. In his own words:

---

6. George Sterling, "The Shadow Maker," American Mercury, October, 1925. Volumn 6 p. 140

> "By a master stroke of military humor we were ordered to return (to Washington) via Salt Lake City, San Francisco, and Panama. I obeyed until I got as far as San Francisco, where, finding myself appointed to a second lieutenancy in the Regular Army, ingratitude, more strong than traitor's arms, vanquished me. I resigned, parted from Hazen more in sorrow than in anger and remained in California." (7)

For a while Bierce worked in the mint with his brother Albert. But as soon as he could gain adequate reputation to support himself by his pen, he threw up his job at the mint gladly. After a period of apprenticeship he became editor of the News-Letter and later editor of the Argonaut. In these papers he ran various columns which attracted wide attention. The most widely read of his columns were "Prattle," "The Town Crier," and "Telegraphic Dottings."

Sometime within this period Bierce was married to Mollie Day, generally alluded to as the belle of San Francisco society. The exact date of his marriage is uncertain,(8) but

---

7. Grattan, Bitter Bierce, p. 20, requoted from Bierce's "Bits of Autobiography," in Collected Works, Vol. I.

8. Dr. De Castro places the marriage date as December 25, 1871, but he is alone in this supposition, which is obviously wrong. Bierce went to London in 1871. Since he did not live with his wife after his return from London, and since three children were born of the union, the marriage must have been at least three years before 1871.

1867 or 1868 seems most probable. For a short time it seems that Bierce was extremely happy. But it was impossible that anything should bring him happiness long.

His matrimonial troubles grew out of the fact that he and his wife were too much alike - a situation often fatal when temperament is the source of similarity. Little is known of his family affairs, or why he left his wife in 1871 and went to London. Once separated, however, they never met again. It is natural to assume therefore that the three children born of the union must have come before the trip to London. The three children were: Leigh, who died a reporter in New York City in 1901; Day, who was killed in a drunken argument over a woman in California; and Helen, who is still living in San Francisco.

In London, Bierce obtained a place on Fun, a paper edited by Tom Hood. It was not hard for a man of Bierce's wit to win a place for himself with the "Fleet Street Gang," a group of dashing young writers who worked for Fun in their spare time, and spent their time mostly in imbibing at one of the local inns. Bierce soon became one of this number.

In 1873, Cobwebs from an Empty Skull by "Dod Grile," Bierce's London pen-name, was published by John Camden Hotten. For this piece of work Bierce was promised one hundred pounds

sterling, to be paid at an early date. As it turned out, Hotten put him off as long as possible, until Bierce literally forced a check out of him. Before it could be cashed, however, Hotten died - from overeating pork pie, Bierce claimed - leaving Bierce stranded with the worthless check. But there was one possibility - if he could get to the bank before news of Hotten's demise was received. But the "Gang" were seated around their usual table in the Ludgate Station tavern. Bierce went in for a drink and related the sad story of Hotten's death. Then followed several hours in which they tried to compose an appropriate epitaph.(9) One of the best ran as follows:

"Hotten
Rotten
Forgotten."

Bierce arrived at the bank half hour after the news of Hotten's death had been received. The delay cost him a hundred pounds sterling.

"The Fiends Delight" was another work published

---

9. De Castro, Portrait of Ambrose Bierce, p. 42.

under the pen-name "Dod Grile" during his stay in London. Some idea of the flagrant manner in which he shocked the sensibilities of the good people of London can be derived from the following excerpt taken from the preface of the work:

> "In writing, as in compiling, I have been ably assisted by my scholarly friend, Mr. Satan; and to this worthy gentleman must be attributed most of the views herein set forth."

Besides his work on Fun, Bierce was at various times connected with Figaro, The Bat, the Comic Annual for 1873 and 1874, and others. In the spring of 1874 he was given full charge of The Lantern, a rather fancy twelve-page paper, sponsored by the Empress Eugénie, then in exile in England. The paper was a retaliation upon Mr. Rochefort's La Lanterne, in which he wrote scurrilous bits of gossip about the Empress. The Lantern was discontinued after the second issue, on account of the fact that M. Rochefort was unable to reply. He gave up without a struggle.

All during his stay in London Bierce was associated with journalists whose quality was inferior to his own. It is safe to say that he learned much from them, but it is true also that he suffered then as in America, from a lack of criticism. This defect shows up quite

obviously in his works. But it is equally apparent that Bierce's nature was not the type to take criticism seriously. There was too much resiliency in his makeup for criticism to make any permanent impression. Most writers, however, who treat Bierce deplore the fact that he was never among his superiors, a condition which of necessity would have brought out the best that was in him.

It seems that he enjoyed to the fullest extent the Bohemian circle of Fleet Street, in which he moved. They wined, dined, and deviated from all normal habits of life. Bierce himself expressed the thought that they did too much of everything that was done. Whatever his habits may have been, his morals (10) did not suffer to any great extent. What his intellect suffered can only be conjectured.

Bierce was thirty-four years old when he returned to San Francisco in 1876. He was now the undisputed leader of the west-coast journalists. Besides his remarkable ability, which made him tower above all others, he had now

---

10. Morally Bierce was always above reproach. As a matter of fact, he was often too prudish to be congenial. Once he threatened George Sterling's life if the latter went in swimming wearing only trunks. Neatness and personal cleanliness were so important to him that it is said he shaved his entire body every day, and changed his clothes more often in a day than the average person did in a week.

the added prestige of an English journalistic career. His influence in San Francisco consequently was very great.

> "No man's reputation as a writer was quite made in those days until Bierce had pronounced upon him. We were his slaves and obedient to his will, and right royally he cracked the whip over us. He went so far as to pass judgment on the private affairs of the devotees of his circle which finally led to estrangements..." (11)

There were two remarkable things about Bierce's personality: his unusual vitality, which the ladies said could be felt at a distance of several feet, and the extraordinary piercing blue eyes, that the stranger invariably remembered if he forgot all else about Bierce.

One of his eccentricities was an inordinate fondness for dumb animals of all kinds, particularly lizards and horned toads. But for some unaccountable reason he could never stand the sight of a dog. One of his lizards formed a habit of sitting on his shoulder and peering down at his fingers as he wrote. Bierce somehow conceived the notion that the little fellow had intelligence and could criticise his work. His strange habit of allowing his pet horned toad to share his bed must have been rather uncomfortable at times.

---

11. Grattan, Bitter Bierce, quoting Pearson's Magazine, Vols. XXXVIII and XXXIX, 1913.

In his literary clique Bierce was truly an autocrat. He had the tongue of an asp and pen of wormwood, both of which he used all too freely, and both of which were feared far and near. In his vigor he sometimes carried his wit too far, and caused on numerous occasions much bitterness. Nevertheless he was feared and respected as a critic and commentator. One reason for his dictatorial power was the comparative isolation of the West Coast and consequently a lack of communication with the writers on the East Coast. The most important reason, however, is simply the fact that the man had power.

With the exception of George Sterling and a limited circle of his other protegés, it cannot be said that Bierce showed much encouragement to young writers. His standards were arbitrary and generally too high, and his abuse too cutting if they fell short.

Bierce's literary work was as varied as his personal interests. He wrote stories, poems, articles, criticisms, columns, and practically everything else in the gamut of journalistic endeavor.

One of the most interesting things that he did while on the West Coast was a column called "Prattle," which has been mentioned before. This time, however, following his return from London, he worked for William Randolph Hearst

on the Examiner; and his column was to some extent colored by the interests of his employer. This should not be construed, however, as a blot on his escutcheon of journalistic ethics, for the ideas of employer and employee in the case usually coincided, until Hearst was bitten by the political bug. Afterwards there was a minor divergence.

"Prattle" was the forerunner of such columns as those fostered by Winston Churchill, Lommex Hunter, and Walter Winchell. Bierce originated the idea, and since his time many have tried to get like results, only with varying success.

In 1896 Hearst sent Bierce to Washington to fight a measure that was before Congress. The measure involved seventy-five million dollars, which Collis B. Huntington was trying to wriggle out of paying over to the Government relative to his railroad interests. When this unsavory business was ended successfully for Hearst, Bierce remained in Washington and wrote for The American magazine and The Cosmopolitan.

Used to a free rein and unlimited self expression, Bierce could not stand the weight of the Eastern editorial hand. The days of aggressive personal journalism were ended. He finally gave up in disgust and devoted his time

to collecting and editing his works, which he published at intervals between 1909 and 1912.

Gradually he lost his powers, and life became a burden. Even his two trips to California in 1910 and 1912 failed to revive his interests. One of the things that troubled him--had troubled him since 1880--was asthma. The disease had been brought on in a characteristic manner. Soon after his return from England he decided, for some unknown reason, to spend the night in a graveyard. While he was asleep with his head on a tombstone, a heavy fog came up, and he was drenched to the skin. From that time on asthma made life miserable for him. It was on rare occasions indeed that he could spend any length of time in the city without suffering horribly. Even while he was in San Francisco, his material was sent in to the papers from the surrounding country, where he roamed from place to place seeking comfort.

On October 3, 1913, Bierce left Washington for a tour of the battle fields on which he had fought, supposedly to revive his memories before his contemplated trip to Mexico.

On November 6, the tour over, he passed through New Orleans on his way South. He was interviewed by the local papers, and treated with the acclaim due a celebrity.

According to the account given in a local paper, he was dressed entirely in black except where his white collar and cuffs could be seen. In his hands he carried a black ebony cane. He stood straight and erect, and, except for his bushy snow-white hair, no one would have suspected that he was an old man.

His statements about his plans for the future were rather indefinite. It is entirely probably that he had no fixed idea in his mind as to what he would do. He implied, however, that he intended to travel diagonally across Mexico on horseback, then take ship for South America, where he would go over the Andes and across the continent. If possible he would return to the United States again.

At Chihuahua, Mexico, he wrote to his friends in recognition of a draft which had been forwarded to him from Washington. Afterwards no authentic information has come to light concerning the fate of Ambrose Bierce. That he is dead there can be no doubt, but how he died is a matter of speculation.

Of the several accounts given of Bierce's end none seems entirely plausible in all respects. Dr. Adolph Danziger ("Adolph de Castro") has given a detailed ac-

count replete with personal interviews with his alleged murderers. In substance, his report goes: Bierce got drunk and proceeded to enlighten Villa, the famous Mexican rebel, on his weak points, expanding at the same time the virtues of Villa's opponent. Villa lost no time in having him shot. This report well may be prejudiced; for this reason the following quotation from George Sterling is included here:

> "Danziger was the person over whose head Bierce broke his cane to fragments --- and this --- bears evidence of being a postponed revenge. One is left to wonder why he did not repair to Chihuahua and feast on the bones of Bierce."[13]

Another account of Bierce's death is given by one "Tex" O'Reilly, a soldier of fortune, who claimed that he discevered Bierce's grave in a lonely spot in Seirra Majada. According to this account Bierce was slain by treacherous Mexicans, who desired the large amount of gold coins which Bierce had a habit of carrying around

---

13. George Sterling, Introduction to In the Midst of Life, P. X.

with him.

But the most probable account, however, and the one accepted by Mr. George Sterling, is that given by George F. Weeks, a correspondent stationed in Mexico during the revolutionary disturbances in 1918. Mr. Weeks reported that he had met in Mexico City one Dr. Edward Melero, who claimed that he had known Bierce intimately. Upon Mr. Week's suggestion Dr. Melero inquired into the matter and reported that Bierce had deserted from Villa, under whom he had entered service, to join the Constitutionalists. Later he was captured by one of Villa's generals on a train bearing ammunition, upon his refusal to answer questions he was summarily shot and buried in a shallow grave, with a peon captured at the same time.

It is hard to accept any of these stories at full face value. It would indeed be unusual for a man seventy-one years old to participate in a revolution, in the cause of which he could not have the slightest interest. Yet such a course seems remotely possible from a letter written by Bierce shortly before he left for Mexico. In the letter he stated in no uncertain terms that if he should be stood up against a wall and shot to pieces, that would be a good way to pass out of life, immeasurably better in-

deed than old age, or desease, or breaking one's neck on the cellar stairs.

It is entirely probable that the truth of the matter will never be cleared up satisfactorily. Yet the stories come in, until almost as many Mexican towns claimed to be the death-place of Bierce as Grecian towns have claimed to be the birthplace of Homer.

No one succeeded in knowing Bierce in his lifetime. As he related in an anecdote to Ruth Harding, he did not know himself. With Bierce it was a difference of degree rather than kind. He was more baffling to himself because he was a man of unusual powers. And, trying to analyze those powers, he became different. He was a mixture of contradictions that loses its shape and meaning when tampered with.

Why, after all, should one try to understand him and his outward actions, when he spent a life time trying to explain them to himself without succeeding? A superficial examination will bring out the following points: his intellect was as far as possible divorced from his emotions, his physical being was an automaton subservient to the controlling power of his mind, there were forces that he did not understand, that created, and directed,

and impelled. Then there were four major blights in his life, some of which number have been mentioned already: his wound in the head during the war, his unhappy marriage, the horrible disease of asthma, and his inability to make money.

Many people who have found an interest in Bierce have thought of him as a bitter, turbulent man, torn by forces that would not let him rest. This is fundamentally untrue, although not apparently so. His bitterness affected people who had violated what he considered the universal code of life. Inwardly, at times, he was serene, like a warm hearth in a snug home. But it was a rationalized calmness that helped him to bear his troubles while laboring under the most adverse circumstances. In one of his succinct statements he declared, "troubles are hard to bear, but that is no reason why you should be." Like most men who preach, he did not always follow through in practice.

Bierce's emotions were highly developed and hard to manage, but his intellect was powerful enough to keep them in check and to submerge them, so far as his writings were concerned. As for his private life and personal conduct, not so much can be said.

Some physical reaons for his bitterness have already

been mentioned. At one time or another these wrecked nearly all the friendships that he ever developed. Any number of psychological reasons may also partly explain his temperament.

He was out of tune with the times.[14] It is not difficult to understand the uncongenial atmosphere in which Bierce found himself, when we realize that the United States, particularly the West Coast, of his time did not bother itself with critical thinking. Its energies were taken up in expansion and business enterprises. Life was too swift to take time out for abstract thought. Bierce, of course, knew and recognized the trend of things, but he was too stubborn to change his course.

A selection from the preface to the The Devil's Dictionary will give some idea of his lack of regard for his time. It reads more like a defiance than an explanation:

"To enlightened souls who prefer dry wines to sweet

---

14. "For any popular hearing Bierce emerged on the American scene betwixt too early and too late." P. H. Boynton, More Contemporary Americans, p. 77.

> sense, to sentiment, wit to humor, and clean English to slang."

In the early gold-rush days of California such a thing as a private moral code hardly existed. Bierce insisted on having one.

> "To the --- apostle of liberty he was an old fogy because he still believed in a code, even though the code was derived from life and not imposed upon it --- ."[15]

It is decidely unfortunate that he chose to set up arbitrary rules of conduct, both professional and private, and to judge people in general by their observance or deviation from them. His pronouncements carried weight, and few contested his place as literary dictator of the West Coast. Taking into consideration his powerful intellect, his opponents found only one safe way of retaliation, and that was, as someone has said, "by a large chunk of silence."

---

15. Ibid, p. 83.

CHAPTER II

The Craftsman

The quality of the work produced by any writer is merely a question of comparative values. Instinctively, when an unknown writer is mentioned, the average person begins to draw parallels. What well known writer does he most nearly resemble?

The student of American literature finds himself in a difficult situation when he attempts to compare Ambrose Bierce with other American writers. Bierce stands alone, not like a towering mountain, but rather like a jagged rock in a desert. He is not a great writer when compared with the truly great writers, but a strong and sturdy individualist who did not depend upon the rules and techniques of the great for his own literary achievements.

Some writers have been so lacking in acuteness as to force an analogy between Bierce and Poe. There is a similarity if we think only of subject matter, but the method of treatment and the style are so dissimilar that it leaves no doubt in the mind that Poe had no influence whatever upon Bierce.

Bierce himself always showed a strong antipathy to any mention of this subject, although in many ways he admired Poe. Poe's imaginative scope, his capacity for feeling, and his depth of imagery far exceed those of Bierce. Bierce was hard, brittle, realistic; he did not feel the deep human interest that was so much a part of Poe. Poe was a dreamer who hid from the realities of life, whose life was a constant search for beauty and the redeeming elements of human nature. He had a capacity for love. He was a Romanticist with a lyric soul. Bierce was a realist, devoid of sentimentality, ignorant of love, possessing no semblance of what might be considered a lyric soul.

There are some elements of similarity among the works of Bierce, O'Brien, and Maupassant, but it is probable that these are coincidental since only one story from each of these writers bear a noticeable likeness. The difference in the treatment here, too, is a striking contrast.

O'Brien's "What was it?" is dynamic, intense, and full of apprehensions. Like a good detective story it holds the interest up to the last.

Maupassant's La Harld is terror-ridden, stark, strange, and gripping. It is highly dramatic, activated by a tense undercurrent of emotional stress.

Bierce's The Damned Thing possesses none of these elements of terror and feeling; it merely encourages the reader to reason the problem out.

In the works of Cervantes and Hardy there is an element of ironic pessimism, but withal they are permeated with a cosmic humor that takes the edge off their ideas of frustration and futility. Bierce could not appreciate humor in any form except the grim humor of fate. Self-pity and loneliness took possession of his artistic sincerety and rendered him ineffectual to the vast majority of readers. He was a misanthrope without the redeeming virtue of humor, and such an adverse rationalistic method of reasoning appeals only to the select few. As for stylistic similarity Bierce and Aldrich are much akin. Both used the "snap" ending or the "twister," but in power and virility there is no comparison. Bierce is forceful and vigorous; Aldrich is uncertain, pasty, and soft.

Bierce, among most American writers, stands out in his power of insinuation. He suggests and implies for more than he dares tell. His power, at times, is as uncanny as his method is artificial, but his art rings true in the final summation.

> 'He storms the kingdom of art by violence, and the death-rattle of his harsh dry laughter rings long afterwards in our ears.' [16]

Sometimes the horrible phantasmagoria of his mind makes the reader shudder and involuntarily look around half expectantly, and again he forces the reader to look within himself.

> 'It is the last touch of art: it is the art that compels the reader to search his own soul.' [17]

In this Bierce was a master; he forces the reader along a path of independent reasoning to the tune of his phrases. In this he achieved what many American writers have failed to do.

---

16. E. J. O'Brien, The Advance of the American Short Story, p. 185.

17. F. L. Pattee, The Development of the American Short Story, p. 305.

Two themes are predominant in the sixty-eight most important short stories that Bierce wrote: war and the supernatural. His four years in the Union Armies gave him abundance of material for his later works. But better than that they gave him emotional freedom and allowed him to expand his personality.

> "He turned naturally to war episodes, because, although actual, they were the furthest removed from the even tenor of normal life."[18]

But war alone did not satisfy Bierce. He selected the unusual and the startling for his stories, thus twice removing himself from the "even tenor of normal life." Some readers may find his scientific realism at odds with his sensational plots, but if his methods are understood this will not detract from the value of the story.

Bierce was among the first American writers to picture the War Between the States as it actually was, and not as most overzealous patriots would

---

18. C. H. Baynton, More Contemporary Americans, p.75.

like to believe. Music, uniforms, and banners were one thing, and violence, horror, and death were another. He had no hallucinations about glory and patriotism. To him war was only a last resort when diplomatic means had been exhausted. It was a business, once the soldier had been initiated. He did not have a feeling of hatred toward the enemy. As a matter of fact, the individual soldier considered the enemy "another order of beings- - - not altogether of the Earth." Bierce, like most soldiers, took little interest in the issues of the war. He was there merely as a part of a great machine.

Unlike Stephen Crane, Bierce left out of his war stories practically all of the elements of emotion and human interest, carving out the facts and reasoning from each action by mathematical analysis. Crane appealed to the emotions; Bierce appealed to the reasoning facilities. To Bierce war was essentially this:

> - - -it was the last resort of conflicting national and international interests; it afforded the individual escape from the base necessities of civilian life; in it the highest moral code could be followed; yet in its accompaniments it was horrible.[19]

---

19. Grattan, Bitter Bierce, p. 142.

It is safe to say that Bierce was lacking in inventiveness, but his nineteen war stories show a capacity for observation that far exceeds mere literary inventions. Exactness, meticulous observations, a twist ending, and skilled psychological analysis attest his art in presenting stories about the war. To record a happening did not appeal to Bierce in the slightest. The happening had to be unusual--almost phenomenal.

There is only one thing, in my opinion, that detracts from his war themes, and that is the too frequent use of coincidence. In many of his stories this is entirely unconvincing in spite of the fact that he tries to justify the happening on the grounds of predestination and chance.

Another element in his war stories that is particularly distasteful to some is his frequent reference to the gruesome, sometimes included for no justifiable reason whatever. Such things as human bodies being gnawed by rats or devoured by wild animals pleased him to such an extent that he made use of such episodes whenever possible. This linked in perfectly with Bierce's idea of the insignificence of man in the great scheme of things.

A never failing topic of interest to Bierce was the idea that a brave man could be so changed by fear as to become an entirely different individual. Fate, too, had a strong fascination for Bierce, particularly the little ironies of fate that showed the insignifance of human beings.

Among American writers of ghost stories Bierce stands out in one respect: He had the ability to mix in well balanced proportions both credulity and skepticism, and to give the final product such rationalistic implications that the reader substitutes thoughts for disbeliefs.

No better example of Bierce's attitude towards ghosts can be found than his own definition of a ghost:

> "Ghost, n. The outward and visible sign of an inward fear."

The idea of ghosts and the supernatural, of course, was nothing new in American literature. Since the days of witchcraft in Salem, Massachusetts, writers have utilized the supernatural for literary purposes. Among our writers who have treated this subject are Poe, Hearn, Fitz-James O'Brien, Irving, Hawthorne, and still earlier, Cotton.

The writers that I have mentioned treated the subject of the supernatural more or less incidentally, drawing their material from popular superstitions or from the imagination. Bierce, on the other hand, placed most of his emphasis here, and treated the subject in a rationalistic manner. Bierce makes use of a wide range of materials for his plots. Some of the topics he treats are: death from fear, when fear is not justified; actual ghosts, with no attempt at an explanation; amnesia; dreams; mechanical man; hallucinations; conflict with an invisible being; induced belief in ghosts; a haunted house; and actual contacts with the spirit world.

Some of the ideas used in his ghost stories are without doubt original, but others are probable adaptations. In some of these stories he anticipates modern ideas to a remarkable degree. Take for example "Maxon's Master," the story of a mechanical man, or The Damned Thing, in which he postulates that many things about us are unseen because light waves of certain lengths are invisible to our eyes.

The bulk of Bierce's short stories are contained in two volumes: In the Midst of Life and Can Such Things Be? From these volumes several stories have been selected for brief analysis. They illustrate all of the broader types of his stories. Considerable space is thus given to his short stories, but this is justifiable on the grounds that his fame rests most securely on his short stories. The stories selected may not be his best, but aside from the fact that they are distinct types, they reveal Bierce in his inimitable treatment of difficult subject matter, some of his philosophy of life, and his detached impersonal method of character portrayal.

From the list A Horseman in the Sky has been omitted, not because the story is not among his best but because it has been treated so often by writers on Bierce that anything written here would be conscious or unconcious repetition. The five selections are: An Occurence at Owl Creek Bridge, Killed at Resaca, The Famous Gilson Bequest, A Jug of Sirup, and Chickamauga.

Before taking up these stories in brief analyses it is well to note that Bierce did not attempt to write stories portraying the horrible actualities of war. His excuse for writing, aside from monetary gains--which is true of all writers at one time or another--were isolated happenings of a strange and unusual nature. He did not have the faculty for building up fantastic fabrications, nor did he wish to indulge in actualities that were tainted with emotionalism. Both were foreign to his nature and both were alike repulsive both in himself and in others. Logical sequence is in Bierce's stories.

In part one of An Occurence at Owl Creek Bridge a man is standing on a railroad bridge in northern Alabama. He looks at the swirling water twenty feet below, seen through the loose boards upon which he stands. His hands are tied behind him, and around his neck is a rope. The slack from the rope reaches to his knees. Near him on the bridge are two soldiers and two officers.

The writer builds up the setting, giving every detail that will aid in developing the picture in the mind of the reader. There are no emotional flourishes,

no conscious play upon the nerves of the reader. Like a machinist he turns out his material upon the lathe with exactness and neatness. There is no superfluity, no useless movements. But the effect is more devastating on the nerves because of his aloofness. The details of the exact position of the soldiers, of the exact height of the bridge, and of the arrangement of the loose boards upon which they stand are horribly suggestive, and for that reason grips the mind of the reader.

The man closes his eyes and waits. His nerves are tense. A noise strikes his ear drums, a regular hammering noise, like a sledge pounding upon an anvil. It rises in crescendo throbbing in his ears. It is merely the ticking of his watch. He thinks of his wife and children. If he can only free his hands, a quick plunge into the current might mean safety. He pictures himself in the water struggling toward the shore. This detailed account of the man's mental state is only a prelude to building up a logical explanation of what follows. The Captain nods to the Sergeant. The Sergeant steps aside, releasing the boards upon which the victim is standing.

The reader has the impression here that the man has been hung.

In part two the author goes back and describes Peyton Farquhar as a well-to-do Southern Planter. He gives details as to why Farquhar has strong sympathies with the cause of the South, and how he would do anything in his power to aid the [said] cause.

Just before a major Northern advance, civilians were forbidden under penalty of death to approach Owl Creek Bridge. The bridge is highly inflammable, and a fire here would seriously hamper the advance. Farquhar decides to risk his life in an attempt to destroy the bridge. Sufficient reasons are given for every move.

In part three Farquhar falls straight down through the bridge. There is a jerk as the rope tightens about his neck; then streams of fire pulsate through his body, choking and suffocating him. A loud splash follows, and the pressure of water begins to roar in his ears. He knows that the rope has been broken. Here the reader has the impression that Farquhar was not hanged. When he rises to the surface

his hands are free and his senses are alert. The writer mechanically, and with devastating effect on the nerves of the reader, gives the various impressions of the man as he swims across the river amid a shower of bullets. Every little detail is added to make the action plausible and natural. At length he gains the river bank and the shelter of the woods. He wanders around until nightfall, by which time he is sore and tired. His neck is bruised and horribly swollen. Finally he reaches his home where his wife waits for him with a smile of ineffable joy on her face. She reaches out her arms to him.

Suddenly there is a stunning blow on the back of his neck; a blinding light flash before his eyes--then all is darkness and silence!

In the last sentence the body of Peyton Farquhar is described as swinging gently from side to side beneath the timbers of Owl Creek Bridge.

The reader gets a final jolt in the end, for he is surprised to discover that Farquhar meets his death after all. The fancied escape was a mere pigment of Peyton Farquhar's frenzied imagination. It all happened from the time he began falling until the

noose tightened about his neck--a time lapse of perhaps two seconds. One would discredit the story immediately were it not for the fact that the author has made it appear logical. It stimulates thought.

"Chickamauga" has a type of subdued action somewhat similar to Stephen Crane's Red Badge of Courage. But the treatment of the subject matter is entirely different, as different as stories can be when the theme is so much alike. There is no warmth in Bierce's treatment, only a chilling mental reaction, in which the reader has about as much sympathy for the principal character as he would have for a cold sardine.

A child, playing soldier with his tiny wooden sword, wanders away from home and deep within a large forest. His action is logical--Bierce makes it logical, perhaps too logical, and he pads the simple action with his own philosophy of war and fear.

Finally the child becomes weary and lies down upon the ground and sleeps. While he is asleep,an army passes, is defeated, and begins to retreat. It is not logical that a child should sleep amid

such noises as would be caused by a battle. The author sets this point to rest by making the child a deaf-mute. This, of course, satisfies any doubts concerning the probability of such action, but it encourages the reader to regard the child only as a specimen, and as such capable only of stimulating mental curiosity.

As the wounded men come crawling through the woods, the child sees them and thinks instantly of the time when he rode upon his father's back. With this in mind he climbs upon the back of the first man that comes near. He is shaken off with a vicious shrug, and with a horrible hiss the soldier turns away leaving the child sprawled upon the ground. The child can see that in place of a lower jaw the man has a gruesome mangle of blood and bones--the sickening moments of a passing skill. This is a brutal and perhaps natural war scene, but we would hardly call it realism.

In the last scene of the story the child wanders back to his home, which he finds in flames. There in the light of the conflagration lies the dead body of his mother. Her head had been partly

shot away and her brains, a frothy mass of red and grey, have oozed down over her face. As the child stands before her, "he utters a series of inarticulate and indescribable cries--something between the chattering of an ape and the gobbling of a turkey--a startling, soulless, unholy sound, the language of a devil. The child is a deaf-mute."

This is perhaps the most gruesome story written by Bierce. It is repulsive in the same manner that a morgue or a slaughter house is repulsive.

"Killed at Resaca" shows Bierce's conception of the folly of love. Lieutenant Herman Brayle is shown, by a series of incidents, to be the bravest man in the regiment. His bravery at times borders on foolhardiness. He is liked and admired by the whole regiment, in spite of the fact that he had one most unsoldierly quality: he is vain in his courage. At every turn he apparently welcomes death. After a remarkably long time he is finally killed by the enemy. On his person is a letter written to him by a lady friend in California. Among other things the letter states that she had been told by a friend that he (Lieutenant Brayle) had been seen crouching

behind a tree in some battle in Virginia. She goes on to say that she does not believe it, but she could bear to hear of her soldier-lover's death, but not of his cowardice.

A year later the author delivers the letter to the young lady in question. He tells her that Lieutenant Brayle has fallen in battle and that he has come to place the letter in her hands. She takes the letter mechanically, colors slightly, and adds that it was hardly worth the trouble. Suddenly she starts involuntarily.

"This stain," she says, "is it surely it is not --."

"Madam," he says, "pardon me, but that is the blood of the truest and bravest heart that ever beat."

She shudders and flings the letter to the blazing coals. She exclaims that she could never stand the sight of blood, and adds by way of after thought:

"How did he die?"

The author looks at this creature; she is beautiful, indeed detestably beautiful.

"He was bitten by a snake," he replies.

This story is one of the most damning, from the point of view of women, that Bierce ever wrote. The story is remakable and interesting because it is the nearest Bierce ever comes to human interest. However, it is so mechanized and treated so objectively that it elicits no emotional response. The whole story is obviously written for the sake of the last few lines, a procedure generally fatal to the lesser artist.

"The Famous Gilson Bequest" gives more completely than any other story Bierce's philosophy of life. Upon the basis of this story it would be safe to say that Bierce was one of the most extreme misanthropes America has ever produced. It is perhaps generally accepted that an author's fiction is no accurate criterion by which to judge his character and his opinions and ideas of life. But in this respect it must be remembered that Bierce, more nearly than most American writers, lived and wrote in strict accordance with arbitrary codes set up by himself.

This tale has to do with one Mr. Gilson, an intrepid robber of sluice boxes in a mining district in California. He had been barred from the better

saloons in the town, and was spurned generally by the few honest people that the town afforded.

Finally he was caught stealing a horse, and was summarily hanged by his captor, Mr. Brentshaw, not, however, before he was given an opportunity to make a will in which he left all his worldly possessions to Mr. Brentshaw, upon condition that the testator's body be taken from the tree and "planted white." Upon removing the body Mr. Brentwhaw found in one of its pockets a duly attested codicil of the above mentioned will. It was here stated that if anyone could prove that the deceased had ever stolen anything or in any way mistreated anyone, that person could claim the entire property of the afore mentioned testator. Should it be proven by more than one, the property would be equally divided among them. If the property were not claimed during a perid of five years, it would revert in its entirety to Mr. Bretshaw. The little property that the man possessed would hardly pay the burial expenses, but Mr. Brentshaw goodnaturedly carried out the request of the deceased.

It was soon discovered, however, that the deceased owned an enormous amount of money and property. Mr. Brentshaw immediately began a drive to prove that Mr. Gilson was an honest man, and above reproach in every respect. The newspapers took up and and pictured the deceased as an upright and honorable citizen. A law was hastily passed by the state legislature pertaining to the will, and at the same time creating several lucrative offices, and authorizing considerable expenditures for the construction of bridges that were never to be built.

Applicants swarmed in to claim the money, but Mr. Brentshaw bought off all witnesses and bribed judges to such an extent that at the end of five years not a single contestant had gained a penny. But the struggle cost him his life.

In the last part of the story Bierce cannot resist inserting the element of gruesome horrow. He has the mentally unbalanced Brentshaw visit the grave of Gilson during one of the worst storms in the history of the town. Many of the coffins have been washed up, "about and among which the water

gurgled with low sobbings and stilly whispers." The immortal part of the late Milton Gilson was seen panning the dust in the exhumed coffins. The next morning Mr. Brentshaw was found dead among the dead.

Bierce pictures in this story the mere ~~farcical~~ nature of man's outward reaction toward the question of right and wrong. He shows by concrete example the direct control exercised by a man's pocketbook over his ideas of justice and equity.

"A Jug of Sirup" is one of Bierce's best known ghost stories, but is included here [more] to show the logical order in which he arranges such material, which is generally discredited by the public at large.

First it is proved in detail that the central character, Silas Deemer, actually died and was duly implanted in the ground. Bierce then proceeds in a logical manner to show that Deemer was a man of extraordinarily fixed habits. For twenty-five years, with the exception of Sundays, he had been seen behind the counter of his store, and in no other place. An anecdote is related which showed the absolute regularity of Deemer's daily schedule.

over his account books deeply absorbed in his work. The effect is startling. The timid flee, the skeptical walk slowly away, and the brave remain.

After a time several of the hardier spirits enter the store, and the rest can hear them stumbling around inside cursing and shouting. The figure of Silas Deemer is undisturbed; he continues his methodical operation on his account book. Finally the crowd is drawn inside, pulled by a collective mania, all except Alvin Creede. Then the light goes out, and a terrific battle ensued among the crazed mob, each trying to make his way out.

The next day it was obvious that the vacant store had been the scene of a terrific battle. When the account books were examined it was discovered that the last entry was for the day of Deemer's death!

With this out of the way Bierce goes back and introduces Alvin Creede, a banker, and one of the most respected citizens of the town; in short, a man of undoubted veracity. Creede arrives home one moonlit night carrying a jug of sirup, as he thinks. He puts it down on the veranda while he gets out his keys to open the door. His wife comes to greet him, and when he turns for the jug it is gone. His wife asks him if he is sure he brought the sirup. He then gives a detailed account of how he bought it from Deemer, but stops midway when he realizes that Deemer has been dead for three months, and that the stock in his store had been sold to a competitor.

He is trying to rationalize the whole situation when his little daughter comes in and asks if her brother may have the little jug when they are through with it. The ghost is thus established and the story of Creede's experience spreads through the town.

The next night a crowd in a half-believing state of mind gathers before the store of the late Silas Deemer. Suddenly the store is flooded with light, and the figure of Silas Deemer can be seen bent

CHAPTER III

Contributions

An age-old fencing motto is: "To the heart: always strike at the heart." Almost without exception Bierce makes a thrust at the intellect. A notable exception will be treated later in connection with his most famous longer work, The Monk and the Hangman's Daughter.

Like a dealer in curios, he places his wares before the public, merely as oddities and unnatural specimen, not as sentimental and pathetic manifestations of life. With a smile, half skeptical and half credulous, he displays the abnormalities which he has created. The sensation felt by the reader is comparable to that of a visitor in a morgue or a slaughter house--physical, horrible, repulsive, but of the mind. The death of the central character (and this occurs in most of his short stories) is simply the death of a person, and of no more significance than the death of an animal.

In many of Bierce's short stories the principal character is a pathological case, very interesting as a subject for pathological study--to be analyzed and not sympathized with. Seldom does he exhibit any sense of an appreciation of human values. Humanity as a mass served as his background--a background before which one life was lived in a death-grip of suspense. The suspense ends when the character dies.

> "The man was an artist, cold, cynical, conscious of his art. He was bound by no rules: he was heedless sometimes even of fundamentals."[20]

Bierce was at odds with his environment both in a literary sense and in a moral sense. He was a perfectionist at a time when public and private morals were at a new law. Since he was a man of indomitable will, it is not strange that he should rebel. Unfortunately his rebellion was so complete that he set himself up as dictator, and as such lived in a little world all his own.

---

20. F. L. Pattee. The Development of the American Short Story. p. 304

Bierce seems to have struck upon the new idea, more from personal prejudice than otherwise, that a short story need not have a love element. He held that a love story should not be expected of the short story writer, since it was unsuited to the mechanics of this abbreviated literary form. There is much truth in this, as attested by some of the best short stories that have ever been produced.

It is perhaps not claiming too much to say that Bierce created the episodic short story. He tells a story in a succession of relays, sometimes breaking off far a generation or so, or reverting to an entirely different line of action. This is decidedly the method of the novelist. Bierce puts his stories together in sections, like a jigsaw puzzle. The cracks and seams are disregarded; the whole is what matters. In The Devil's Dictionary he defines the novel as a "short story padded." He takes out the padding in reverse order and makes a go of it, succeeding all the while in his main endeavor to create a vivid impression.

Bierce's approach to the subjects for his short stories was impressionistic rather than realistic. Every episode in his stories was a searchlight focussed on one point of interest, to make one lasting impression. To create this impression Bierce sometimes went too far to convince his readers, and as a result his effectiveness was counteracted to a considerable extent. As a general rule, however, he did not overshoot the mark, but blended in the light and shade to get just the right effect. His real power lay in the fact that for the reader the story really begins where it ends, for his powers of insinuation and suggestiveness continue to grip the mind long after the reading has stopped.

There is one story by Bierce which I feel should be considered at length here, for it is so utterly different from anything else he ever did that some explanation should be offered. The reference is to <u>The Mark and the Hangman's Daughter</u>, a story approximately forty thousand words in length. Its peculiarity rests not only in its length, but in the subject treated and the intense human interest which permeates the entire work.

Dr. G. A. Danziger (Adolphe de Castro) claimed that he (Danziger) translated the story from a German original by Herr Richard Vass. Since he did not have an effective command of English, Danziger asked Bierce to rework it for him for publication in America. This Bierce did, making considerable changes in the text, particularly the ending. Danziger insisted on a happy ending, but Bierce objected and the story was given a sad ending, which was more in keeping with the general nature of the story.

Just how much liberty Danziger took with the original, which is not extant, it is hard to say, although he professed to Bierce to take none. Just how many changes Bierce made is equally hard to determine. But this much is true, the story is decidedly beyond the scope of Danziger's other works, and is unlike Bierce in the treatment of the subject matter and the deep play of emotions throughout the story. If we give credit where credit is due, Herr Richard Vass probably would receive the greatest

share. Bierce, himself, in the preface, gives most of the credit to Vass and adds:

> "My light opinion of the credit due anyone else is attested by my retention of Danziger's name on the title page. In this version the work that came into my hands from his has been greatly altered and extended."

I am inclined to think that considerable changes in the work were made by Bierce, as can be seen in the following selections chosen from various parts of the story. Anyone familiar with Bierce would have no difficulty in recognizing them as his own.

In the words of Brother Ambrosius as the troop of monks journeyed over the mountain:

> "These then, were the mountains of which we had heard so much, and the white firmament was nothing else than the snowy summit of the range--which the Lutherians say their faith can remove. I greatly doubt it."

Bierce could never resist airing his views on religion, which in any form he considered to be weakness and ignorant superstition. The last two lines in the above quotation is a sly bit of venom placed on the lips of the priest.

Brother Ambrosius continues:

> "Strengthening our hearts with spirits, we entered the narrow pass in prayer and whispering anathemas against evil---"

The word spirits seems forced, indeed it seems to imply ardent spirits. This is another subtle thrust at religion and the priesthood.

At the great seasonal dance in the mountains Ambrosius observes:

> "I could see also how amorously the Saltmaster's son looked at the ladies, which provoked me very much, as he couldn't marry them all, especially those already married."

The above observation of the monk reflects the small esteem that Bierce placed on women. The meaningful twist in the last line is characteristic of Bierce.

At the same dance Ambrosius continues his observations:

> "Usually before drinking a young man would hand his cup to one of the maids, who barely touched it with her lips, and, making a grimace, turned away her face. I am not sufficiently acquainted with the ways of women to say with certainty if this proved that at other times they were so abstemious."

This is another indirect thrust at women in general. It shows a clever insinuation that is typical Bierce.

The monks were inordinately proud of their skill in fishing, and the halls were cluttered with enlarged pictures of their catches:

> "Below each picture the weight of the monster and the date of its capture, together with the name of the person taking it, were inscribed in large letters. I could not help interpreting these records-----as intimations to all good Christians to pray for the souls of those whose names were enscribed."

This is a classical example of Bierce's subtle wit, which all too often goes unnoticed. It is also another reference to the insincerity of church people in general.

It is to be regretted that Ambrose Bierce spent about eighty per cent of his time in journalism, which he rightly recognized to be one of the lower forms of the literary art. Of journalism he wrote in one of his letters:

> "/It/ is so low a thing that it may be legitimately used as a means of reform or a means of anything deemed worthy of accomplishing-----Literature is an

> art;----- it is not a form of benevolence. It has nothing to do with 'reform,' and when used as a means of 'reform' suffers accordingly and unjustly."[21]

Paradoxically enough, Bierce cherished the highest ideals for the best type of literature, such as that produced by Molière, Shakespeare, Cervantes, or Goethe. Yet he indulged in the brutal personal journalism of the West Coast, which could not under any circumstances be considered literature. The truth of the matter is, he was forced into it to earn a living, distasteful as it may have been. As a natural reaction his perspective of American literature was unbalanced, and he became intensely discouraged in regard to the future of American letters. As a journalist, however, he reigned supreme on the West Coast until public sentiment made personal and offensive journalism unpopular.

If he were writing today he would find a market for his works in most of the up-and-coming magazines. Even ten years later he would have had a much wider

---

21. B. C. Pope. Letters of Ambrose Bierce. p. 4.

reading public than he enjoyed. Only recently one of Bierce's works narrowly missed being published in The Esquire magazine under the name of a contemporary writer. It was happily recognized, however, by one of the readers. Changes were made immediately and the story withdrawn.

Bierce was made editor of the News Letter in San Francisco in 1874, and editor of the Argonaut in 1877, soon after his return from London. His violent attacks upon the shams and hypocracies, both political and religious, can be illustrated best by examples.[22] Under the column which he called "Prattle," nearly every corrupt politician or religious leader of his times received a verbal lashing at one time or another. The following exerpt deals with Father Egan's corrupt handling of the St. James Church property:

---

22. The following examples were taken from the San Francisco News Letter, September 25, 1869, before Bierce was made editor.

> "-----But with his unfortunate habit of procrastination when money is to be paid, he pocketed the same, reporting to the worthy Bishop that he had paid it upon the mortgage; yea, even unto the aforementioned mortgage. Upon investigation this turned out to be a lie --as have been intimated."

In another column headed:

> The Town Crier
>
> "Hear the crier!" "What the devil art thou?" "One that will play the devil, Sir, with you."

he wrote scathing articles about public affairs, libeling particularly crooks and cheap politicians.

In a section called "Telegraphic Dottings" he was closely akin to Walter Winchell. As a matter of fact, Winchell uses the same technique as Bierce, only with less freedom of expression. The following example will clarify my statement:

> ". -. -. Governor Walker of Virginia, is inaugurated. There! That's the last we will

hear of him until he is arrested for stealing. - . - . ------The usual miners strike. - . - . Grant in Wheeling. He put the wrong end of his cigar in his mouth and has not spoken a word for a week. - . - . - ."

Under "Foreign News" are the following interesting observations:

". - . - . The Paraguay War is again ended. - . - . Burlingame goes to Stockholm, thence Schleswig-Holstein, thence to Capernaum, thence to the Devil on a wild ass. - . - ."

The above examples are arbitary selections, but they should give some idea of Bierce's journalistic technique. Bierce's short stories should be divorced from Bierce's journalism. The one is a labor of love, and the other is a labor of necessity. There is one thing remarkable, however, about Bierce's journalism, and that is his total abstenance from the use of slang, which he defined as "a foul pool at which every dence fills his bucket and then sets up a fountain," or more emphatically, "the grunt of the human hog (pignaramus intolerabilis) with an audible memory." Cringing familiarity as "grinning

through a horse collar" was to him intolerable. In all of his writings he never permitted himself to lose his personal detatchment from the subject treated. He was truly a personal journalist with an impersonal technique.

With the possible exception of his short stories Bierce's fame rests most securely in his epigrams. Two quotations from different contemporary authors will show the divergence of opinions on the merits of Bierce's epigrams:

> "Some of Bierce's short stories will undoubtly survive, especially the war stories, but I believe that his most durable work lies among his epigrams." [23]

Another writer expresses his opinion thus:

> "The Devil's Dictionary showed a mind neither agile nor incisive; the satiric definitions are commonplace in substance and muddy in expression."[25]

---

23. From a letter written by Mr. H. L. Mencken to the author.
24. The Devil's Dictionary contains most of Bierce's epigrams.
25. Lewisohn, Expression in America, p. 319.

It would be natural, perhaps, to take an average between these two extremes and let it go at that. But I take the liberty to disagree with Mr. Lewisbhn most strongly. Bierce's epigrams are marvels of succinct wit, and they are not "muddy in expression" except in very rare instances.

When one reads his epigrams he should remember that Bierce's caustic definitions are not only satirical, but critical as well. As a matter of fact, his real power as a critic is exemplified more in his epigrams and in his letters than in his critical works. The abrasive force of his epigrams lays bare sensitive nerves that many people with their heads in the sand would like to ignore. Most of his epigrams are not blanket accusation, but are directed at the offenders; and in many cases there is remarkable number of people offending. But some of his definitions are purely the ironical observations of a cynic, with a general application. The following are a few choice definitions taken from his Devil's Dictionary:

Admiration, n. our polite recognition of another's resemblance in ourselves.

Adherent, n. A follower who has not as yet obtained all that he expects to get.

Adore, v. To venerate expectantly.

Clairvoyant, n. A person, commonly a women, who has to see that which is invisible to her patron--namely, that he is a blockhead.

Clergyman, n. A man who undertakes the management of our spiritual affairs as a means of bettering his temporal ones.

Court Fool, n. The plaintiff.

Defenseless, adj. Unable to attack.

Cynic,n. A blackguard whose faulty vision sees things as they are and not as they ought to be - - - .

Egotist, n. A person of low tastes, more interested in himself than in me.

Famous, Conspicuously miserable.

Faith, Belief without evidence in what is told by one who speaks without knowledge of things without parallel.

Nothing truer can be said of Bierce's poetry than his own statement:

> "I am not a poet but an abuser--that makes all the difference."[26]

---

26. B. C. Pope, Letters of Ambrose Bierce, p. 14.

Notwithstanding this statement, however, he harbored some well-defined ideas about poetry, and considered himself somewhat of an authority as a critic and as a composer.

The bulk of his poems, published in two volumes: Shapes of Clay and Black Beetles in Amber deal with persons and things common to the people of California during his times. Naturally an attempt to find an interested public at a later date or in a different locality would prove fatal. But in spite of this obvious difficulty Bierce somehow resented the public's lack of interest in his poetical works. As has been mentioned before, he lacked that depth of feeling and human touch so necessary for the production of poetry that will stand the test of time. His approach to poetry was much the same as his approach to the short story, but here his mechanical perfection defeated its own purpose. The short story, particularly the type written by Bierce, can stand an objective treatment. But poetry, to be full of meaning and to have at the same time the personal touch, must be handled subjectively. This was apparently beyond Bierce's scope, hence the principal reason for his failure as a poet.

Dr. De Castro had made out a rather wordy case for the merits of Bierce's sentimental poetry. And Mr. George

Sterling, who received much critical help from Bierce, was more or less positive in his praise. It might be interesting to note the poems selected by Mr. Sterling as the best. They are: "Geotheos", "T. A. H.," "Presentment," "Death of Grant," "Another Way," "Reminded," and "Invocation."

I see nothing to recommend any of these poems. Not a single one of them can boast any semblance to "a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings." The following example from "Geotheos" is typical of most of his sentimental poetry:

> "As sweet as the looks of a lover
> Saluting the eyes of a maid
> That blossom to blue as the maid
> Is ablush to the glances above her,
> The sunshine is guilding the glade
> And lifting the lark out of shade."[27]

His satiric verses make good reading today, especially those poems dedicated to persons of some prominence in

---

27. Quoted from C. H. Grattan, Bitter Bierce, p. 192.

days gone by. But the sheer vindictive force of some of the poems has an intrinsic value of its own, and is well worth reading even in ignorance of the person involved. We could hardly say, however, that these poems possess any pretense at literary merit: To cite a few examples:

Rejected[28]

When Dr. Charles O'Donnell died
They sank a box with him inside.

The plate with his initials three
Was simply graven -- "C. O. D."

That night two demons of the pit
Adoun the coal-hole shunted it.

Ten million million leagues it fell,
Alighting at the gate of Hell.

---

28. Ambrose Bierce, Black Beetles in Amber, p.157.

Nick looked upon it with surprise
A night--storm darkening his eyes.

"They've sent this rubbish C. O. D.--
I'll never pay a cent!" said he.

I take the liberty to quote the following Vers de Société as selected by Grattan.[29] They make wonderfully smooth reading, and approach as near to humor as Bierce ever does:

Not Guilty

"I saw your charms in another's arms,"
Said a Grecian swain with his blood a-boil;
"And he kissed you fair as he held you there,
A willing bird in a serpent's coil."

The maid looked up from the cinctured cup
Wherein she was crushing the berries red,
Pain and surprise in her honest eyes--
"It was only one o' those gods," she said.

---

29. Grattan, Bitter Bierce, p. 193

A treatment of Bierce's critical works would of necessity touch everything he wrote except his short stories, and even here he is critical to some extent. Most of his powers of criticism were directed against current evils of his time, in which category of evils were included fools, literary pretenders, publishers, crooked politicians, and corruptions of all types. A great deal of his criticisms were just, but all too often his castigations were severe, and ouf of all proportion to the offense.

As a literary critic Bierce exchanged his pen for a scalpel, and he dug for the root of the evil. He could discover faults that no other critic had even the remotest idea existed. The best of his criticisms, however, are to be found in his letters, more specifically those letters written to George Sterling and a rather limited circle of his other protéges. I have noted that Bierce entertained an unusually high ideal for literature at its best, as divorced from journalism. The following excerpt[30] taken from his letters will adequately show his exalted views on literature:

---

30. George Sterling, "A Memoir of Ambrose Bierce," preface to The letters of Ambrose Bierce.

> "Literature and art are about all the world really cares for in the end; those who make them are not without justification in regarding themselves as masters in the house of life and all others as their servitors."

No greater tribute could be paid to literature than this. It is hard to appreciate his ideals in this respect unless we realize that throughout his life Bierce was forced to earn his living by participating in the form of yellow journalism of which he had an inherent antipathy. As a sequel to the above quotation it might be well to add another taken from his article, "To Train A Writer:"

> "(The apprentice) should - - - - - forget that he is an American and remember that he is a man. - - - - - - - In the virtues, so-called, he should discern only the rough notes of a general expediency - - - - - - and it would be needful that he know and have an ever-present consciousness that this is a world of fools and rogues, blind with superstitions, tormented with

envy, consumed with vanity, selfish, false, cruel, cursed with illusions--frothing mad!"

Here he starts off calmly enough, but he allows himself to be worked up to an incongruous final climactic sentence. This is entirely unnecessary and constitues one of the chilf objections to a considerable body of his work. He underestimates the ability of the reader to get his point, and tries to register by a final knock-out blow. Much of the effectiveness is too often rendered pallid and insipid by making the point too obvious.

Bierce had a violent dislike for slang in any form, and particularly of dialect. This, perhaps, explained to some extent his strong antipathy for Burns, about whom he writes:

"- - - - - -He has not not, I think, been translated into English, and I do not (that is, I can but will not) read that gibberish. I read Burns once--that was once too many times; but happily it was before I knew any better, and so my time, being worthless, was not wasted."[31]

---

31. B. C. Pope, The Letters of Ambrose Bierce, p. 20.

It is needless to say that this criticism of Burns is narrow, damning the fine emotional spirit of his works solely to gratify a taste hostile to dialect. Then, too, he tries to measure Burns according to American standards of literary expression, which were perhaps on a lower level. Bierce has his point, however, if his views are accepted solely from the point of view of one who loves pure English.

For Homer and other truly great writers Bierce had most prodound respect. Yet it is generally conceded by those who have made a study of Bierce that he was not a learned man. I agree with this view; nevertheless I think he deserves credit for his respect for learning. The following example, taken from a letter to George Sterling, bear directly upon the subject:

> "My favority translation of Homer is that of Pope, of whom it is the present tendency to speak disparagingly, as it is of Byron. I know all that can be said against them, and say some of it myself, but I wish that their detractives had a little of their brain. - - - - I hold (with Poe) that there is no such thing as a long poem."[32]

---

32. Ibid, p. 93

The last sentence in the above quotation is significant, for it accounts, in a measure, for his lack of success. To him any long-drawn-out piece of work was unbearably tedious. And with the exception of The Monk and The Hangman's Daughter, he never indulged in such. The public of Bierce's day demanded sentimental novels, and not episodic short stories. Now, as it appears, the tendency has been reversed.

Bierce was never without knowledge of how the public would react to a given situation. "To be forewarned," then, should have resulted in "forearming." But he either lacked the armor, or showed a haughty, disdain to use it. The public should be brought around to his way of thinking. Compromising never occured to him.

Concluding the chapter on contributions I include a brief resume of the things Bierce has given to the American short story, and some of the things he had done in other fields of the literary world. Some of them may have been duplicated by other writers, and to them due credit should be given. Space, however, precludes any extensive parallels or comparisons.

Bierce brought into his short stories the element of pathology, which he treated objectively. He was among the first, if not the first, to hold that the short story need

not have a love element. He created the episodic short story, which he told in relays. He held that the short story and the novel were essentially the same. This, of course, is the opposite of the view held by Poe and the public in general. Bierce left out of his stories the element of human interest, held to be necessary in the writing of short stories.

A notable contribution made by Bierce is his Devil's Dictionary, a book of cynical definitions which is illuminating, although prejudiced.

As a critic Bierce was too dogmatic and dictatorial; and as a poet he had power, but lacked feelings.

In conclusion it should be added that while Bierce is not a great writer, when compared with the really great, he has a peculiar fascination for a select group of readers. And his fame will live more by change than by any general public acclaim. Like many others, I first became acquainted with him purely by accident. Since then I have come to know him better through desire.

Of the scores of people I have asked to give their reaction to Bierce, scarcely more than a half dozen professed any knowledge that such a person ever existed. This much I noticed: All of the people who knew him had

read more than one of his books, and expressed a desire to know more about him. Thus I predict a samll, obscure, but permanent place for Ambrose Bierce in American literature.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Books:

Ambrose Bierce, Tales of Soldiers and Civilians. E. L. G. Steele, San Francisco, 1891 (reissued, New York, 1898, as In the Midst of Life).

Ambrose Bierce, The Monk and the Hangman's Daughter, F. J. Schulte and Company, Chicago, 1892.

Ambrose Bierce, Can Such Things Be? Caffell Publishing Company, New York, 1893.

Ambrose Bierce, The Cynics' Word Book, Doubleday, Page & Company, New York, 1906 (The original title, The Devil's Dictionary, was later restored).

Ambrose Bierce, Collected Works, Neale Publishing Company, New York and Washington, 1909-1912.

Percy Boynton, More Contemporary Americans, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1927.

V. W. Brooks, Emerson and Others, E. P. Dutton and Co., New York, 1927.

F. T. Cooper, Some American Story Tellers, H. Holt and Company, New York, 1911.

A. D. De Castro, Portrait of Ambrose Bierce, The Century Co., New York and London, 1929.

C. H. Grattan, Bitter Bierce, Doubleday, Doran and Company, Inc., New York, 1929.

H. L. Mencken, Prejudices, 6th Series, A. A. Knopf, New York, 1927.

E. J. O'Brien, The Advance of the American Short Story, Dodd, Mead and Company, New York, 1923.

F. L. Pattee, The Developement of the American Short Story, Harper and Brothers, New York and London, 1923.

F. L. Pattee, The New American Literature, A Survey, The Century Co., New York and London, 1930.

B. C. Pope (editor), Letters of Ambrose Bierce, Book Club of California, 1922.

Vincent Starrett, Buried Caesars, Covici-McGee Co., Chicago, 1923.

Periodicals:

American Mercury, July, 1925; October, 1925.

Current Opinion, September, 1918; June, 1915.

Bookman, September, 1902; September, 1910; July, 1911; February, 1915.

Current Literature, September, 1909.