

A REVALUATION OF THE LITERARY REPUTATION
OF AMBROSE BIERCE

A Thesis
Presented to
the Faculty of the Department of English
University of Houston

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Ansel E. Gray

June 1950

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ABSTRACT

The reputation of Ambrose Bierce, journalist and short-story writer of the last half of the nineteenth century, has rested, for the most part, on the satire in his journalism. Bierce's caustic, vitriolic wit, illustrated most brilliantly in his Devil's Dictionary, has delighted many readers since Bierce first startled San Francisco with his "Town Crier" columns in 1868. His reputation as a journalist was made before he began writing short-stories; consequently, when, twenty years after the Civil War, Bierce recalled war experiences in his short-stories, the public considered the tales as only secondary to his "Prattle" and journalistic writing. In view of the good Bierce accomplished through his columns - such as defeating the Southern Pacific Railway funding bill - this subordination of his short-stories might have been justified during his time. Such writing, however, was pertinent only as long as the situation which evoked it existed. Consequently, when considering Bierce's works today, one must look for that which has the stamp of permanency. True, many of the epigrammatic barbs in his Devil's Dictionary are as applicable today as they were when they were written, but they are barbs, flashes of wit, nothing more; they are not fully developed and, consequently, do not thoroughly satisfy the reader.

The purpose of this thesis, then, has been to study Bierce's short-stories - to ascertain their qualities as worthwhile literature and to determine to what extent they reflect in Bierce a different personality from that expressed in his satirical writing. This study has shown that

Bierce's stories, measured by formal short-story standards, are well-written and that Bierce's highly individualistic, impressionistic style makes them excellent stories. The study has also pointed out that these tales reflect in Bierce the elements of romanticism and realism, qualities somewhat different from the cynicism and bitterness reflected in his journalism. This revaluation of Bierce's literary reputation has concluded with the assertion that Bierce's short-stories are really his most important work and that they deserve a far more prominent place than they now hold in the development of the short-story in America.

PREFACE

After an author is dead and cannot defend his ideas, critics are free to analyze those ideas, attempt to correlate them with incidents in the author's life, and focus their attention on certain points which interest them. Thus they may or may not build his reputation on a truly representative basis. Ambrose Bierce, a journalist of the last half of the nineteenth century, was also a competent writer of short-stories. However, his four biographers - McWilliams, Neale, Grattan, and de Castro - consider his short-stories lightly in comparison with his journalistic writing. The result of their conclusions, consequently, based upon the vitriolic satire of "Prattle", Bierce's newspaper column, is that Bierce was a misanthropist, a cynic, a bitter man. The interpretation of these biographers can be questioned.

Inasmuch as Bierce's journalistic writing was, for the most part, pertinent only to the time of publication, perhaps a study of his literary work will reveal more permanent writing. This paper, consequently, will attempt to show by means of a biographical résumé and an analysis of his short-stories that Bierce's reputation should rest on the realism and the romanticism in his stories, not on satire pertinent a generation ago.

Very little truly objective criticism has been written on either Bierce's life or his work. McWilliams' biography is the only scholarly one, the only one which attempts objectivity and thoroughness. The other biographies apparently were written to make an already amazing man even more amazing. It is to McWilliams' Ambrose Bierce, consequently, that I am most highly indebted for biographical facts concerning Bierce;

however, from Grattan's Bitter Bierce, Neale's Life of Ambrose Bierce, and de Castro's Portrait of Ambrose Bierce I obtained some interesting and helpful depictions of Bierce's manifold personality. I am especially indebted to Mrs. Anne Phillips for her patient and constructive guidance throughout the preparation and completion of this thesis. I am also grateful to Dr. R. Balfour Daniels and Dr. Helen B. Rufener for their critical reading and suggestions.

A.E.G.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. BIOGRAPHY	1
II. BIERCE'S REPUTATION AS A SHORT-STORY WRITER	49
III. ANALYSIS OF BIERCE'S SHORT-STORIES	61
IV. CONCLUSION	106
BIBLIOGRAPHY	111

CHAPTER I

BIOGRAPHY

The moon appearing through a cloud is more mysterious than it is in a clear sky; through a cloud it is ever changing, is always presenting a different picture, whereas in a clear sky it remains monotonously the same. Shining through a cloud, the moon retains part of its brilliance and, in so doing, increases its beauty, for that which promises something still unrevealed arrests the attention more than does that which leaves nothing concealed. Recognizing this, Bacon suggests that one not betray even to his friend too much of his real purposes and thoughts. "Speech of man's self ought to be seldom, and well chosen."¹ Surely, that which is seen vaguely in half light arouses curiosity, and thus interest, more readily and more permanently than does that which has been treated explicitly in the bright light of authentic detail.

Thus it is that mystery stories are popular; and thus it is that literary figures around whom mysteries lie are often topics for scholarly papers, magazine articles, and lectures. In the lives of many men, such as Oscar Wilde and Francois Villon, the past, portions of it at least, is as impregnable as is the uncertain future. And as many vague, and often absurd, conjectures are made concerning these pasts as are made by "prophets"

¹ Francis Bacon, "On Discourse," Essays - English and American, Raymond MacDonald Alden, editor (Atlanta: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1918), p. 38.

concerning the future. Both Wilde and Villon disappeared mysteriously, but long after their deaths had been assumed, reports sprang up that they had been seen in various and strange places, drunk and disheveled, but very much alive.

Adding another "unsolved case" for scholars to probe, in December, 1913, the mysterious past again allowed a momentary separation in its misty wall and enveloped Ambrose Bierce, who, some believe, in that year walked across the Mexican border into physical obscurity. The mystery is so complete, in fact, that there is no certainty that Bierce ever went into Mexico. The most wide-spread contention is that he went into Mexico and was killed, probably by Villa's men, in the Mexican revolution. However, the only letters which he wrote directly before and after going over the border were to his secretary, Carrie Christiansen. These letters Miss Christiansen destroyed, even though she knew that they would be of great importance; she knew also that Bierce would not want any "uncomposed" letters to be published posthumously.² However, this case appears more tenable than does that which contends that Bierce committed suicide beside the Colorado River.³ Some persons, of course, twenty years after the disappearance held that the writer was still alive. As late as 1933 Bierce's only daughter, Helen, wrote that she was receiving letters from

² Carey McWilliams, Ambrose Bierce (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1929), p. 319.

³ Walter Neale, Life of Ambrose Bierce (New York: Walter Neale, publisher, 1929), p. 441.

all over the world, advising her that her father still lived. Some of these, obviously, were attempts at extortion, the writers claiming that for \$5000 or some like sum they could inform Helen concerning the whereabouts of her father.⁴ Other letters, however, were no doubt from sincere, well-meaning persons who thought that they actually had some valid information about Bierce. Thus the mystery of Ambrose Bierce has evolved, and anyone who knows anything about Bierce has heard of this mystery.

However, the mystery of Ambrose Bierce did not originate in 1913, when the seventy-one-year-old satirist and short-story writer disappeared. The mystery began many years earlier, perhaps when he was born; for as one glances back over the few biographies and articles which have been written about the man, he realizes that Bierce never appeared in a clear sky, but was always shining through a cloud. Biographers vary widely in their interpretations of Bierce's personality and literary accomplishments, and in many instances they disagree sharply on what would appear to be prosaic, uncontroversial, biographical facts. And when they do agree that an incident occurred at a certain place and time, they differ amazingly concerning the subsequent results of the event.

Hence, this biographical sketch is not an attempt to establish any new "facts" about either Bierce's life or his death; its purpose is to evaluate the immensely diverse accounts offered by various biographers. From these numerous accounts have been selected those which seem most plausible, both from the standpoint of credulity and from that of authentic references. In a sense, Bierce's life will be passing again in review,

⁴ Helen Bierce, "Ambrose Bierce at Home," American Mercury, 30:458, December, 1933.

this time before judges a generation removed from his biographers of the 1920's and, consequently, uninfluenced by Bierce's personality or by the time in which he lived.

To what extent Bierce's apparent cynicisms and antipathies can be traced back to June 24, 1842, at which time he was born to indigent parents, Marcus Aurelius and Laura Sherwood Bierce, in the "Horse Cave" settlement in Meigs County, Ohio,⁵ is conjectural. However, it is ironically significant that the future scorner of piety was born of pious parents on the edge of a revival meeting. Christened Ambrose Gwinett, he was the ninth child of nomadic parents, who, except for sober piety, had few strong qualities for him to inherit, unless their curious predilection for names beginning with A can be construed as wit. Preceding Ambrose among the children were Abigail Bell, Amelia Josephine, Ann Maria, Addison Byron, Aurelius, Almeda Sophia, Albert Sherwood, and Augustus, none of whom gained any distinction in the world.⁶

Characteristic of his type, Marcus Aurelius took his family and drifted westward to Indiana, finally settling at Elkhart, the place that Bierce was to look back upon, with no particular fondness, as his home town.⁷ Neither the town nor Bierce's family background provided him with any incentive toward a literary career. His formal schooling, if indeed

⁵ McWilliams, op. cit., p. 21.

⁶ loc. cit.

⁷ Ibid., p. 22.

it can be called that, was fragmentary and limited. With his brother Albert he attended a rural school in which no organized classes were set up. Each student was expected to bring one book, the nature of the book being of no particular importance, and from that book to glean his education - that is, to learn to read and to write. From this disorganized schooling and from a fair library at home Bierce obtained the little formal education he was to receive before the Civil War.⁸ In studying his writings, it is apparent that, for the most part, any influence that Bierce's childhood may have had on him was negative. That he actually held his childhood in contempt and disgust appears in a poem which he printed in The Wasp, a San Francisco journal for which he worked, on November 3, 1883, the first part of which follows:

With what anguish of mind I remember my childhood,
 Recalled in the light of knowledge since gained;
 The malarious farm, the wet, fungus grown wildwood,
 The chills then contracted that since have remained.
 The scum-covered duck pond, the pigstye close by it,
 The ditch where the sour-smelling house drainage fell,
 The damp, shaded dwelling, the foul barnyard nigh it -⁹

Such lines, even if written as humorous satire, certainly reflect no happy memories of early childhood. However, his life of indigence and of menial tasks, so repugnant to the proud and haughty boy, brightened under a new influence when Bierce was about seventeen. His uncle, General Lucius Verus Bierce, scholarly as well as militant, sent him to the

⁸ Ibid., p. 24.

⁹ Ibid., p. 26.

Kentucky Military Institute, one of the best institutions of its kind in the country.¹⁰ Since early records of the institute have been destroyed by fire, it is impossible to determine how long Bierce stayed in this institution, but letters to a friend indicate that he was there in 1859.¹¹

Inspired by the militant zeal and stately conduct of his uncle more than by patriotism, at the age of nineteen Bierce joined the Union forces; and when civil strife broke out in 1861, he was already with Company C, 9th Division, in the Indiana Infantry.¹² He kept few notes of his war experiences; consequently, most of what is known about Bierce as a soldier exists in histories of battles in which he fought.¹³ Biographers Neale and de Castro, both of whom claim an intimate acquaintance with Bierce, pass quickly over his war experiences.¹⁴ Apparently his recollections were such that he did not wish to talk of them, even in his most loquacious moods; perhaps he wanted to reserve the expression of his feelings concerning the war for his short-stories.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 25.

¹¹ Loc. cit.

¹² Ibid., p. 30.

¹³ Ibid., pp. 30, 31, 33, 58.

¹⁴ Although Neale devotes seventeen pages to Bierce as a military strategist, he assigns only one paragraph, p. 69, to his participation in the war. De Castro devotes about an equal amount of space to Bierce's actual fighting, and what he does say is incongruous with the information of other biographers. De Castro says that Bierce was discharged with a lieutenancy, and Neale claims Bierce was a captain with a breveted majority at the time of his discharge. See Adolphe de Castro, Portrait of Ambrose Bierce (New York: The Century Company, 1929), p. 14.

Concerning Bierce's war experiences a few significant incidents can be noted; the importance of the incidents, of course, is subject to considerable controversy. Bierce was wounded at least twice. This fact seems to be beyond refutation. The last of the two wounds was rather serious; it cut a gash in his temple and, so it is reported, grazed his brain. The wound was serious enough, at any rate, to necessitate a convalescent leave. George Sterling, a student of Bierce and a poet, claims that, according to Andrew, Ambrose's brother, Bierce was mentally affected by the wound and was never the same afterwards.¹⁵ Grattan also accepts this account.¹⁶ Neale, however, accuses Sterling of fabricating the entire story. Neale writes, "Bierce's head wound did not in the slightest affect his health, nor his character, and if Sterling meant to imply that Bierce's mentality was affected by the wound, he knew the insinuation to be untrue when he made it."¹⁷ Who is to be believed? As far as the reliability of the two critics is concerned, one is as good a choice as the other. Neale accuses Sterling of passing fiction off as truth. At the same time, however, he acknowledges Andrew to be an older brother of Bierce and the last of Marcus Aurelius' children to die.¹⁸ None of the brothers and sisters were left then to contend Andrew's claim. Andrew is not mentioned by McWilliams, who states that Ambrose was one of nine

¹⁵ George Sterling, "The Shadow Maker," American Mercury, 6:11, September, 1925.

¹⁶ C. Hartley Grattan, Bitter Bierce. (Garden City: Doubleday, Doran and Company, 1929), p. 17.

¹⁷ Neale, op. cit., p. 303.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 38.

children.¹⁹ Neale adds Andrew and increases the number to ten. An insignificant fact, perhaps, but it is given as one of many controversial points to emphasize that the cloud of uncertainty which hangs over Bierce's past gathered almost at his birth.

To return to the head wound and the possible effect it had on Bierce: the injury, Sterling intimated, perverted Bierce into a cynic, making him suspicious of everyone, and especially of his close friends.²⁰ The biographers do agree long enough to focus the light on one fact: Bierce did in later life quarrel with nearly all his friends.²¹ As a matter of fact, Bierce, who has been referred to as the American Swift, paralleled the Dean in spending his latter years in loneliness and sickness. However, these altercations with his friends do not point necessarily toward insanity. Bierce hated littleness of all kinds - hypocrisy, avarice, selfishness - and consequently hated those in whom he found these traits.

Another alleged source of Bierce's cynicism sprang from a consequent incident of his head wound. Before entering the War he wrote a short verse, after the manner of the Cavalier poets, to a young woman of his acquaintance.

Fatima is divine,
For I have kissed her twice
And she is surely mine.²²

¹⁹ See Footnote 5.

²⁰ Sterling, op. cit., p. 11.

²¹ Neale, op. cit., pp. 223, 312-4. See also McWilliams, op. cit., pp. 256-92, 312; Grattan, op. cit., pp. 51-2; and de Castro, op. cit., pp. 226-9.

²² McWilliams, op. cit., p. 56.

While in Elkhart on his convalescent leave, Bierce reportedly went to see the girl to determine her reactions to his token. When she expressed surprise that Bierce had sent it, he supposedly walked away - a dejected, greatly changed man. There was the beginning of his cynicism.²³ This story does not seem credible, but it is one of many appearing in the Bierce myths.

A more plausible cause of Bierce's cynicism, it seems, lies not in any particular incident of the war, but in the overall effect of the war on him. War is a noted sire of cynics, and Bierce, highly sensitive and idealistic, could easily have been greatly affected by it. However, little consideration has been given this idea, biographers preferring more remote and sensational causes.

Concerning the source of Bierce's cynicism, it may be well to add here a discussion of the various conjectures offered by biographers and critics, since cynicism is the one characteristic which is inevitably discussed in all evaluations of Bierce's personality. With the possible exception of his disappearance, his cynicism has been the subject of more inconsistent explanations than has any other aspect of or incident in his life. The possibilities of a head wound and of a thwarted love affair as causes of this misanthropy have been mentioned. That marital trouble was the source of it seems improbable inasmuch as Bierce, despite

²³ loc. cit.

the many allusions to his tragic marriage, experienced no real unhappiness in that marriage until he was in his forties - long after he had become widely known for his satirical attacks against mankind.²⁴

Mary Austin, a novelist and a contemporary of Bierce, believed Bierce's cynicism to be caused by lack of real creative ability. In a letter to McWilliams she stated:

I do think that he was to a certain extent conscious of lack and failure in his own life which he was never willing to admit. Much of his venom grew out of this secret disappointment. He kept forcing the note of savage irony because he really wanted what would not come.²⁵

Franklin Walker holds a very different view - a view particularly interesting in that it alone, of all views presented, regards Bierce's cynicism as a superficial cloak, put on for convenience when Bierce sat down to write. Walker believes that, at the beginning of his journalistic career at least, Bierce felt no genuine misanthropy, cynicism, or whatever the outlook which fathered his satire may be called. Walker offers the following explanation in support of his theory:

Bierce's earliest journalism in San Francisco did not appear in the satirical News Letter, where he first gained his reputation as a wit and misanthropist. In fact, he did not become the Town Crier [a standing column of vituperative wit taken over by Bierce when he joined the News Letter] until the fall of 1868, after he had been in the West for two years. During this period he printed

²⁴ Ibid., p. 188.

²⁵ McWilliams, op. cit., p. 185, citing a letter from Mary Austin.

a few poems and articles in the Californian, items of special interest in following Bierce's development because they contain very few of the later characteristics of the satirist. Further, they suggest that possibly "Bitter Bierce" became bitter chiefly because he inherited and furthered the Town Crier tradition on the News Letter.²⁶

It is possible that had Bierce begun his career as the editor of some literary magazine, such as the Overland Monthly, instead of as a writer of a column already noted for its vituperation, he might have developed his genius along some more moderate lines. Naturally, only conjectures can be offered in support of such a theory, but that such might have been possible is implied by Walker.

More worthy of consideration was the series of four articles signed A.G.B. on the subject of "Female Suffrage." In logical and compelling prose the writer asked that the feminists be accorded a sympathetic reception....He deplored the absence of opportunity for women to be educated, and assured the public that, if allowed to vote, women would make politics decent and respectable.²⁷

These articles do not sound like the Ambrose Bierce of later days. It scarcely seems possible that the bitter leader against suffragettes could have once been so sympathetic toward them. However, these early essays offer support to Walker's theory.

Ten years before Walker advanced his theory, McWilliams presented yet a different suggestion. Two accounts could scarcely be more antithetical. According to McWilliams, Bierce was "instinctively...one of the most idealistic men that his generation produced in America, a man of

²⁶ Franklin Walker, San Francisco's Literary Frontier (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1939), p. 241.

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 241-2.

exquisitely balanced perception, intuition and even sort of harmony."²⁸ However, his reason was in sharp contrast with his idealism, and the cynic resulted. As McWilliams phrases it, "The cynic is the concave idealist."²⁹ But more interesting in the light of Walker's theory is McWilliams' account of how Bierce was regarded by his fellow workers in the Mint, the place where he worked at the time he wrote the articles in support of women suffrage, to which Walker refers.

One thing they [The mint employees] all remembered, however: a cold, sardonic, implacable element about Bierce.....It was not sophomoric irreverence: it was more a passionate protest against ignorance and piety.³⁰

Hence, according to McWilliams, Bierce's cynicism was not an affected thing, but a natural part of him, caused by the clash of an unerring realization of things as they were against an idealistic impression of things as they should have been. His satire, then, was an arrow pointing to an ideal life by piercing the misdeeds, misguidance, and misinformation of man.

As if these varied explanations of Bierce's cynicism were not enough, Joseph Noel, writer and contemporary of Bierce, offers still another. Noel, who terms Bierce the "Bitterest man in America," claims that the bitterness sprang from resentment of authority, so rigidly imposed on him in his childhood by his pious parents. Noel even claims

²⁸ McWilliams, op. cit., p. 115.

²⁹ Loc. cit.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 81.

that Bierce's greatest objection to the Spanish-American War was that Hearst, whose authority he resented, had perpetrated it.³¹

Which, if any, of these interpretations of Bierce's cynicism is correct? Obviously, none can be accepted in complete refutation of all the others. If those who knew Bierce personally and spoke with him could not agree on the man's cynicism, how can critics, who have only his works and discordant biographies at hand, be certain? Although it is not, perhaps, the ultimate explanation of Bierce's cynicism, Walker's theory is the most interesting. If his idea is sound, it means that Bierce lived the last forty-five years of his life in pretense and that he lived it so diligently and consistently that he himself came to mistake this pretense for innate misanthropy - came to regard the cloak of cynicism as his true skin.³² Several other aspects in Bierce's life support this theory, but Walker in his San Francisco's Literary Frontier does not explore them. Perhaps it is just as well that he does not develop his theory further, for, admittedly, most of the supporting tenets - such as the lack of any deeply imbedded, smoldering bitterness in Bierce - are tenuous and difficult to argue. There is one significant point, however, that can be offered as substantial support to Walker's theory.

³¹ Joseph Noel, Footloose in Arcadia (New York: Carrick and Evans, 1940), p. 69.

³² This pretense may account for Bierce's frequent walks in the woods. There he could be his natural self and have a freedom, elsewhere unknown, with the animals of the woods - over which he is said to have had mesmeric power. See Neale, op. cit., p. 62.

That is the fact that Bierce's best literary work is not the work of a cynic, but of a romanticist and, to some extent, a realist. Bierce's Can Such Things Be?, a collection of his supernatural short-stories, represents some of the world's most effective mystery stories. These stories are not the stories of a cynic. They are not stories steeped in satire. These stories are their own excuse for being. There lies within them no seething rebellion against society, government, or man such as lies in Gulliver's Travels or Candide, the works of undoubted cynics. The same can be said for Bierce's stories of the war, published under the title In the Midst of Life. What some may judge as cynicism in these stories is no more than realistic accounts of Civil War battles.

Bierce's stories of the Parenticide Club are seldom if ever mentioned by critics. Either biographers have been reluctant to consider tales about murdering one's father as if patricide were a morning chore, or, perhaps, they have not known what to say about these stories so ridiculously horrible that they are humorous. These stories are referred to here to substantiate further the theory that Bierce was not a cynic at heart, but merely for the sake of convenience.³³ A more accurate description of Bierce may be that he was a humorist whose greatest forte was his keen wit and his facile use of satire. Certainly the stories of the Parenticide Club are humorous. The humor may be shocking and

³³ See p. 12.

ridiculous, but it is laugh-provoking.³⁴ The nonchalant way in which Bierce's characters go about their fiendishness adds to the humor of the situation. This nonchalance is seen in the account of the hypnotist who brought his parents under his spell:

Scarcely had the words fallen from my lips when she dropped upon her hands and knees, and backing up to the old man squealed like a demon and delivered a vicious kick upon his shin! An instant later he was himself down on all-fours, headed away from her and flinging his feet at her simultaneously and successively. With equal earnestness but inferior agility, because of her hampering bodygear, she plied her own. Their flying legs crossed and mingled in the most bewildering way; their feet sometimes meeting squarely in mid-air, their bodies thrust forward, falling flat upon the ground and for a moment helpless. On recovering themselves they would resume the combat, uttering their frenzy in the nameless sounds of the furious brutes which they believed themselves to be - the whole region rang with their clamor! Round and round they wheeled, the blows of their feet falling "like lightnings from the mountain cloud." They plunged and reared backward upon their knees, struck savagely at each other with awkward descending blows of both fists at once, and dropped again upon their hands as if unable to maintain the upright position of the body. Grass and pebbles were torn from the soil by hands and feet; clothing, hair, faces inexpressibly defiled with dust and blood. Wild, inarticulate screams of rage attested the delivery of the blows; groans, grunts and gasps their receipt. Nothing more truly military was ever seen at Gettysburg or Waterloo: the valor of my dear parents in the hour of danger can never cease to be to me a source of pride and gratification. At the end of it all two battered, tattered, bloody and fragmentary vestiges of mortality attested the solemn fact that the author of the strife was an orphan.³⁵

³⁴ During the past several months, I have showed these stories to approximately fifteen persons who were completely ignorant of Ambrose Bierce, of anything about his life, or of what he wrote. Without exception, the reaction of these persons to such stories as My Favorite Murder and Oil of Dog has been the same. They chuckled frequently and audibly and did not pause to comment until they had finished.

³⁵ Ambrose Bierce, "The Hypnotist", Collected Writings of Ambrose Bierce (New York: The Citadel Press, 1946) pp. 809-10.

In this manner does one of Bierce's characters tell about the actions of his parents after he has hypnotized them into believing that they are donkeys. Without too much exaggeration one may say that whereas Mark Twain was a cynic considered a humorist, Bierce was a humorist generally thought a cynic.³⁶

Although the discussion of Bierce's cynicism could be continued interminably, there are other aspects of his life, especially the Civil War years, that are less vulnerable to debate. There seems to be little doubt among the majority of his biographers that Bierce was an excellent and intrepid soldier. His calmness under fire is pointed out by McWilliams in the following incident: Company C, to which Bierce belonged, was advancing on Girard Hill, when one of the company men, Corporal Dyson Boothroyd, was shot through the neck, unable to move after he fell. Bierce picked the corporal up and carried him one hundred yards to safety under galling fire. Apparently Bierce never mentioned the incident to anyone, but McWilliams found an account of it in an Indiana history of the war.³⁷

Most of Bierce's war service was as a staff officer and as a

³⁶ Wilson Follett in "America's Neglected Satirist," Dial, 65:49, July 18, 1918, says of Mark Twain that he was "a born wit who chose on the whole to be a humorist, a disillusioned thinker who found it impossible to let people imagine he was chuckling - or guffawing - sympathetically with them, while in truth he was laughing sardonically at them." George Sterling, op. cit., p. 16, quotes Bill Nye, humorist and contemporary of Bierce, as saying, "Bierce is the originator of all our brands of humor."

³⁷ McWilliams, op. cit., p. 33.

topographical engineer, more commonly known as a scout. Reports are that Bierce was an excellent scout, a fact that led to his assignment with General Hazen after the war.³⁸ However, Joseph Noel, who seems to have had nothing favorable to say for Bierce, implies that there is no proof that he was a good scout. According to Noel, the company took Bierce's word for the lay of the land, and if the company was victorious, it celebrated and took no check of Bierce's topographical work; if the company lost the battle, it was so busy retreating that it certainly did not send men back to double-check the original map.³⁹

Some of Bierce's Civil War experiences will be reflected in the discussion of his short-stories, since war incidents were often subject matter for his tales. One more incident, however, will be noted here concerning Bierce's Civil War years. As has been stated earlier, incidents in Bierce's life which should have been uncontroversial and clear have been diversely treated by different biographers. One of these incidents is Bierce's discharge from the Union army. De Castro states that Bierce was discharged at Huntsville, Alabama, January 16, 1865;⁴⁰ Grattan dates the discharge February 16, 1865, naming the city as Huntsville, Louisiana;⁴¹ Neale refers to Bierce's discharge without giving either date or place;⁴² and McWilliams accepts the same date and place

³⁸ Ibid., p. 70.

³⁹ Noel, op. cit., p. 67.

⁴⁰ De Castro, op. cit., p. 14.

⁴¹ Grattan, op. cit., p. 15. (Grattan also claims that Bierce was not breveted a majority.)

⁴² Neale, op. cit., p. 26.

as does de Castro.⁴³ According to McWilliams, there is no Huntsville, Louisiana, the city designated by Grattan. Hence, McWilliams' and de Castro's information is accepted as most plausible. It was taken from the Official Register of Volunteer Forces of United States.⁴⁴

After his discharge Bierce took a post in Alabama with the Treasury Department of the federal government. However, he did not stay long at this position. The graft was too iniquitous for Bierce to accept; for although he had fought on the northern side, he did not approve of the policy of "to the victor belong the spoils". Consequently, when he was given the opportunity to accompany General Hazen on an expedition for the government, serving as a topographical engineer, he accepted the position readily.⁴⁵ Bierce was still a young man in the fall of 1865, when he joined General Hazen. Only twenty-three years of age, he had seen nearly six years of military service, some of it in hard combat. The expedition took them through the Dakotas and Utah; of these places he made topographical maps.. These maps he was later to publish during the gold rush to the Black Hills. Bierce met the Mormons and approved of them highly; he was later to chide those who could or would not tolerate the Mormon religion.⁴⁶

⁴³ McWilliams, op. cit., p. 58.

⁴⁴ Loc. cit.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 70.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 74.

The expedition was scheduled to return to Washington, D.C., via the route of California and Panama. Bierce accompanied the expedition as far as San Francisco, where he expected to receive a majority in the army. However, he was offered only the commission of second lieutenant, an offer which he refused in considerable heat.⁴⁷ In San Francisco at the time of his disappointment, he left General Hazen's expedition there, apparently with no particular plans in mind. Thus it was that destiny, which Bierce was later to epigrammatize as "A tyrant's authority for crime and a fool's excuse for failure",⁴⁸ had set him down on the West Coast to make his own fortune.

By now it is apparent that it is impossible to proceed far in the life of Ambrose Bierce without stumbling over dissimilar stories. McWilliams' account of why and how Bierce went to San Francisco has been given.⁴⁹ Neale, who implies that he knows all of Bierce's secrets, has a somewhat different story, one more characteristic of a carefree gallant and flouter of life. After the Civil War Bierce was offered a commission in the regular army, "but literature as well as the Army was a lure; so he decided to flip a coin, his career to be decided by a single toss. Literature came up."⁵⁰ It is possible that Bierce told

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 80.

⁴⁸ Ambrose Bierce, The Devil's Dictionary (Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1911), p. 70.

⁴⁹ See p. 19, footnote 47.

⁵⁰ Neale, op. cit., p. 87.

Neale such a story, for, as Neale himself comments, Bierce was fond of telling stories, many of which had no basis of truth. Since Neale knew this, one would expect the critic to be wary in accepting such an explanation. Records show that Bierce made the expedition with Hazen and did not make his way westward because of what the West offered, as Neale suggests. Just what Bierce did have in mind concerning literature and his future is not known, but it is likely that had he planned a literary career he would have gone to the East Coast, the literary center of the day. None of the West Coast literary men were premeditated writers. That is, they did not go West to write. Twain, Harte, Pollard, Miller, and certainly Bierce all wrote only incidentally at first, the lure of the mining camps glowing brighter in their eyes than did the printed page. The remark "certainly Bierce" is made because Bierce, early in his San Francisco career, abandoned the editorship of a paper and went in quest of the gold in the Black Hills.

However, whether Bierce turned to literature deliberately or accidentally is not as important as the fact that he did begin to write. The task of making a living was important in those early days in San Francisco, and Bierce existed meagerly through writing occasional pieces for various papers and magazines and through employment in the United States Mint.⁵¹

⁵¹ Grattan, op. cit., p. 20; see also de Castro, op. cit., p. 19.

Whether Bierce desired to write before he came to San Francisco cannot be definitely stated; however, whatever his intentions may have been, he was neither ready nor qualified to write when he was working in the Mint. This statement is made on the strength of McWilliams' biography⁵² and in spite of Neale's implication that Bierce was, from the very first, a brilliant gem who needed only a slight polishing by the English literati to emit literary scintillations.⁵³ McWilliams mentions, and he is the only biographer who does, the influence of an unsuccessful journalist, James Watkins, on the literary development of Bierce. Not only did Watkins, apparently a brilliant man despite his lack of success in journalism, guide Bierce's reading, he also offered constructive criticism concerning Bierce's writing. McWilliams states:

Watkins instructed his young protégé [Bierce] with kindness, intelligence and insight....he called Bierce's attention to Swift and Voltaire, and advised him to read over the material that William Thackeray had written for Punch, that he might clothe his wit in the silk of charming style.⁵⁴

Encouraged by Watkins and by the fact that some of his magazine articles had been accepted, Bierce took his first journalistic position in San Francisco with the News Letter in 1868.⁵⁵ To begin with, his chief duty was to write an already established column, "The Town Crier," a vitupera-

52 McWilliams, op. cit., p. 84.

53 Neale, op. cit., pp. 54, 450-5.

54 McWilliams, op. cit., p. 84.

55 Ibid., p. 85.

tive diatribe that had neither compunction nor limit. But the column was attuned to San Francisco's rugged frontier culture. The uncouth miners, the gamblers, the women of the street did not want their risibilities merely tickled; they wanted them jarred so that uninhibited guffaws, not polite chuckles, were evoked. Consequently, broad-swinging, personal satire was in vogue, and of such satire Bierce soon became a master. Under Bierce "The Town Crier" became more scurrilous than it had ever been, and the people read it more avidly than ever before. Bierce soon became well known in San Francisco; even the Eastern papers reprinted many of his most caustic and applicable witticisms.⁵⁶ Not only did the East recognize Bierce, but England, even before the journalist visited it, was commenting favorably on his writings.⁵⁷ Perhaps this recognition made Bierce all the more eager to go to England.

However, before dealing with Bierce in England, it is essential to consider a personal and a much-clouded aspect of his life. Bierce was, and on this point all biographers agree, a man of great virility and beauty. He was six feet tall,⁵⁸ lithe and narrow-hipped, with a shock of curly blond hair that set off a handsome face. His god-like appearance has been commented on many times. One may suppose that with physical attributes such as these Bierce was exceedingly attractive to women. According to Neale, "the high and the lowly, my lady and her maid, pursued

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 87.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 86.

⁵⁸ According to his passport to England, Bierce was only five feet, four inches tall. (McWilliams, op. cit., p. 94).

him relentlessly."⁵⁹ Strong character though he was, Bierce did succumb to the more relentless ones and "engaged in thirty or forty liaisons."⁶⁰ From this information Neale suggests that Bierce was essentially a monogamist, a veritable celibate, and that in view of his many opportunities "thirty or forty liaisons" were indeed few. Such a suggestion, however, sounds highly implausible. It is mentioned, however, because it lays the foundation for Neale's explanation of Bierce's "tragic" marriage.

Of this marriage and its effect on Bierce's literary accomplishments much has been written. The subject is one of the more popular in the "Bierce mystery". The marriage has been referred to as tragic, unhappy, ill-fated. Neale exploits it sensually;⁶¹ de Castro alludes to it vaguely, as if the tragedy was too profound for telling;⁶² McWilliams treats it more analytically, with less secrecy;⁶³ Grattan does little more than make a passing reference to a short-lived marriage;⁶⁴ and Helen, Bierce's daughter, feels compelled to present an intimate explanation of the trouble.⁶⁵ The beginning of the marriage, however, and not the ending played a significant role in Bierce's News Letter days.

⁵⁹ Neale, op. cit., p. 129.

⁶⁰ Loc. cit.

⁶¹ Ibid., pp. 133-5.

⁶² De Castro, op. cit., p. 16.

⁶³ McWilliams, op. cit., p. 189.

⁶⁴ Grattan, op. cit., p. 21.

⁶⁵ Helen Bierce, op. cit., p. 456.

Three years after he became associated with the News Letter, Bierce married Mary Ellen Day, daughter of a wealthy miner and of a socialite mother, on December 26, 1871.⁶⁶ Molly, as Mary Ellen was called, was a beautiful, talented woman and apparently quite prominent in the social circles of San Francisco. Bierce, as far as Molly's mother was concerned, was a hack writer who was in no respect good enough for her daughter; hence, Mrs. Day objected strongly to the match. Her objections, however, were not effective, and Bierce and Molly were married.

Before his marriage Bierce had been struggling on his meager salary from the News Letter, and it is fairly certain that he did not have the money to finance a trip to England. Molly's father, who had no personal objections to Bierce, financed the trip as a wedding present to Bierce and Molly.⁶⁷ Hence, Bierce wrote his last "Town Crier" column for the paper on March 9, 1872, and soon after he and his wife were on their way to England.

Although Bierce published three books while in England,⁶⁸ there is little evidence that he did much original writing during his three years abroad. Several obstacles apparently hindered him. First, the London fog aggravated his asthma, an ailment which had been chronic with him since early childhood, thus lessening his physical capacity for work.

⁶⁶ McWilliams, op. cit., p. 92.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 94.

⁶⁸ Hotten published Nuggets and Dust, 1872; Cobwebs From An Empty Skull, 1874. Chatto and Windus, successors to Hotten, published Fiend's Delight, 1874.

Secondly, the peculiar existence of numerous literary cliques in London prevented any one man, unless he rose above all the cliques, from becoming outstandingly popular. If an author was lionized by one clique, he could expect to be spurned by the others. Thirdly, the general attitude of the English toward American writers, while exceedingly friendly and hospitable, was one of amusement more than of serious acceptance of them as true literary men. And in light of the ludicrous conduct of such men as Joaquin Miller, the English can scarcely be held at fault for regarding American authors as considerably less civilized than themselves. Walker tells of Miller's attire at a dinner of the inner circle of the literati to whom he had been given an introduction:

He [Miller] turned up in cowhide boots and a sealskin great-coat, which he kept on during dinner because he was wearing nothing but a shirt beneath it. The guests, including Edmund Gosse, Lady Franklin, and Mrs. Hawthorne, widow of the American author, were at first taken aback by the savage in sealskin, but they decided to enjoy a real American frontiersman while they had the chance. Discovering that his unusual garb had publicity value, Miller set about making a virtue of a necessity.⁶⁹

How could the English be expected to take American writers seriously?

Neale tells an anecdote concerning Bierce which, if true, certainly shows the lack of respect or scholarly appreciation that the English literati had for Bierce. According to Neale's story, which he said Bierce told on himself, Mark Twain was in London at the same time Bierce was, and at a dinner honoring Twain, whom the English seemed to regard more highly than they did the rest of the Americans, Bierce was also given a

⁶⁹ Walker, op. cit., p. 328.

moment of the limelight. Bierce, who in his writings affected a knowledge of foreign languages,⁷⁰ was called upon to read from one of his books, written much earlier. Bierce had forgot that he had spiced it well with Greek, Latin, Italian, and a dash of French. Hence, he had little more than begun to read when he stumbled upon a foreign phrase. Not only had he forgot what the phrase meant, he could not even pronounce it. His embarrassment at the expense of the laughing literati was keen.⁷¹

Consequently, these three conditions - his physical reaction to the London fog, the existence of numerous literary circles, and the attitude of the English toward American writers - plus the lack of financial independence, which forced him to hack for a living, diverted Bierce from serious creative efforts while in England. His hacking, however, did keep him alive. He wrote for Fun, edited by Tom Hood the younger.⁷² For two brief issues he edited The Lantern for Empress Eugenie.⁷³ Generally, this short experience is considered quite a victory for Bierce. Henri Rochefort⁷⁴ was reportedly planning to follow the Empress to England and there harrass her with scurrilous attacks through a

⁷⁰ Bierce's knowledge of foreign languages was confined between the covers of a foreign-phrase book, which he drew from when he wanted to be impressive.

⁷¹ Neale, op. cit., p. 43.

⁷² McWilliams, op. cit., p. 96.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 112.

⁷⁴ Henri Rochefort, descendent of a wealthy aristocratic French family, was a revolutionist who, through the press, attacked the Napoleonic regime. He established La Lanterne in 1868 and devoted most of the paper to attacking the Emperor and Empress. In 1873 Rochefort was sentenced to a penal colony in New Caledonia. It was following his escape from there that he threatened to follow the Empress to England and to resume his scurrilous attacks against her.

newspaper. He had done this before, in a French periodical, La Lanterne. The Empress commissioned Bierce to establish a rival magazine, The Lantern, in which Bierce attacked Rochefort. Rochefort changed his plans to follow the Empress to England, and favorable biographers of Bierce suggest that Rochefort changed his mind because of Bierce's attacks.⁷⁵ The account is a little difficult to believe. A man with Rochefort's adventurous and reckless past would scarcely have been intimidated by the clever but innocuous shafts of Bierce's wit. However, the episode does point out that Bierce was eager to take any sort of writing job at that time to make money.

In the summer of 1875 Mrs. Bierce returned to America to visit her mother. That she returned because of a rift between her and Bierce is not probable. From all indications they were moderately happy when she left, and she planned to return to England and to Bierce in the fall of that year.⁷⁶ That Bierce expected Molly to return is seen in a letter he wrote to Stoddard: "As soon as I feel well enough to travel I'm coming to London till Mrs. Bierce returns, when I shall have a house somewhere in the suburbs."⁷⁷ When Mrs. Bierce left England, she and Bierce had two children, Leigh and Day. Apparently, when she left she did not know, or at least did not tell Bierce, that she was pregnant with their third

⁷⁵ McWilliams, op. cit., p. 112.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 113.

⁷⁷ Loc. cit.

child. However, soon after she arrived in America, she wrote Bierce to that effect, and Bierce prepared to leave England, finally doing so in August, 1875.⁷⁸

Exactly what influence the three years in England had on Bierce is indeterminable. His style improved during his stay abroad. It became more polished. That could have happened in San Francisco, however, for Bierce was just developing as a writer when he left for England. In general, critics agree that Bierce held the English - their form of government, their customs, and all - in high regard, believing them worthy of his admiration and respect. However, a glance at a letter he wrote to Stoddard, writer and contemporary of Bierce, briefing him on London, makes one wonder exactly how highly he did esteem the English literati. The letter, in part, follows:

I have told Tom Hood to look after you....Tom is one of the very dearest fellows in the world and always a good friend to me. But he has the worst lot of associates I ever saw - men who...are not worthy to untie his shoe latchet....Remember this: London - literary London - is divided into innumerable cliques....If you fall into the hands of one clique, all the others will give you the cold shoulder.⁷⁹

Obviously, this letter does not reflect any great fondness for the London literati.

Returning to San Francisco in 1875, Bierce found a considerable

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 114.

⁷⁹ McWilliams, op. cit., pp. 102-3, citing Bierce's letter to Stoddard.

change from the boom town he had left three years earlier. Times were less prosperous; miners who had nearly starved to death on barren claims were looking elsewhere for livelihood and were having a difficult time finding it. Chinese labor had been imported, and the niggardliness and frugality of the Chinese made their labor much cheaper than that of Americans. Hence, unrest was seething everywhere and coming to bubbles on the sandlots. Rabble-rousers advocating a change in government met on sandlots, and the term "Sandlotism" was soon applied to their movement. A kind of socialism, represented in its less vulgar form through such men as Jack London and George Sterling, sandlotism was a growing eddy in the stream of unsettled times. Although this movement was overall much less effective than Bierce had predicted it would be, the commotion caused by one particular sandlotter, Dennis Kearney, was such that it created a steady job for Bierce. In an effort to fight Kearney and his followers, the Argonaut was established in 1877, and through the influence of Fred Somers, part owner of the paper, Bierce was made editor.⁸⁰ In the very first issue of the Argonaut Bierce printed "Prattle," a new column of vituperation, for which he was to write more words probably than for all of his other journalistic efforts combined. The title of the column was copied from Rochefort's "Prattler" in La Lanterne. Hired to attack Kearney, Bierce did so, giving warning at the same time of the apparent danger of the movement. He wrote:

⁸⁰ McWilliams, op. cit., p. 122.

The Kearneyism 'episode' is not an episode; it is part of the general movement. Thousands of armed men are drilling all over the United States to overthrow the government. I tell you the good God Majority means mischief.⁸¹

Fortunately, this statement, as did many others of Bierce, proved to be more alarming than prophetic. Bierce had to begin anew, so to speak, to build his reputation. During his three years in England he kept no contact with the public or with publishers in San Francisco. Through his attacks against Kearney, however, and against social evils he soon gained prominence as a writer. For three years Bierce wrote "Prattle" for the Argonaut, passing from one victim to another, blasting each with supercharged invectives. Occasionally he spared mankind and recalled a war experience or criticized some literary effort. However, he was not satisfied with his work. It paid him poorly, and with a wife and three children to support, he had a heavy responsibility.

Perhaps this financial stress more than dissatisfaction with journalism led Bierce to give up his column and his position with the Argonaut in 1880 and to follow the gold rush to the Black Hills.⁸² Since Bierce had been in the Black Hills with General Hazen's expedition and had made maps of them, he was a likely man to head the Black Hills Placer Mining Company. In about a year the company was gone, and failure was the only reward for the men who had formed the company.⁸³ Although he

⁸¹ As quoted by McWilliams, op. cit., p. 136.

⁸² McWilliams, op. cit., p. 143.

⁸³ Ibid., pp. 145 et. seq.

was in no way responsible for the failure, Bierce felt that he had missed his opportunity to become independently wealthy. His dreams of making his family happy, of providing for them well, and of having for himself plenty of time for writing disappeared. He returned to San Francisco a depressed man.

Fortunately, he was an established journalist. He thought that he could always go back to the Argonaut, resume "Prattle," and make a living. Somers and Pixley, owners of the paper, had learned, however, that they could operate the paper without Bierce and would not take him back.⁸⁴ Bierce considered himself ill-treated in that he had practically made the Argonaut a successful paper, and Pixley became one of the most constant objects of Bierce's scathing wit. Having been refused a position on that paper, Bierce turned unsuccessfully to The Call, then to Mike de Young's Chronicle. De Castro states that Bierce wrote for the Chronicle,⁸⁵ but McWilliams claims that there is no record of Bierce's employment with the paper.⁸⁶ That Bierce would have been employed by a man whom he detested as much as he did Mike de Young⁸⁷ is unlikely. The financial situation became as bleak for Bierce as it had ever been, and he thought of going East. However, Molly liked the West Coast; there, at least, she was near her mother, and Bierce had no money on which to travel. In 1881

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 150.

⁸⁵ De Castro, op. cit., p. 71.

⁸⁶ McWilliams, op. cit., p. 152.

⁸⁷ Bierce detested Young because Young was illiterate, unscrupulous, and desirous for power, a dangerous combination for the publisher of a paper.

under such conditions Bierce finally got a job with The Wasp,⁸⁸ and from that time throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century, Bierce supplied the West Coast steadily with "Prattle".

Bierce stayed with The Wasp about five years, during which time the paper changed owners twice. Charles Webb Howard, original owner, sold to "Ned" McFarlane, a good friend of Bierce.⁸⁹ McFarlane soon wearied of the political journalism so typical of California in the 1880's, and in 1886 he sold the paper.⁹⁰ Bierce's health in the meantime was such that he had withdrawn from all activity except writing "Prattle". Hence, when McFarlane sold The Wasp, Bierce resigned his position and was once again without work.

Times had not been easy for Bierce and his family, even during his employment. Conditions became even more strait after he left The Wasp. According to most reports, however, Bierce's brightest days from a financial standpoint were just ahead. In 1887 Senator George Hearst left the San Francisco Examiner to his son William Randolph Hearst. Young Hearst had money as well as a newspaper. So, regardless of expense, he gathered around him the best journalists of the West Coast. Bierce was foremost of those sought. The exact amount which Hearst paid Bierce is not known. De Castro claims that Bierce received no more than thirty-five dollars a

⁸⁸ McWilliams, op. cit., pp. 153-4.

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 165.

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 168.

week.⁹¹ Neale claims, however, that Bierce received approximately \$5000 a year, nearly three times the amount suggested by de Castro.⁹²

The latter figure seems as much too high as the former does too low.

Whatever the definite salary was, it is generally agreed, as McWilliams states, that Hearst "pampered, mollified and befriended" Bierce at all times to keep him on the Examiner staff.⁹³

"Pampered and befriended" as he was, Bierce's unhappiest moments occurred during his employment by Hearst. Day, one of his sons, who so greatly favored his father in appearance and sensitive temperament, was killed in a duel over a woman.⁹⁴ Day, only seventeen at the time, probably acted in the hasty temper of youth. The stories surrounding this tragedy are numerous and probably all inexact. However, through all the stories runs one central thread. Apparently Day had become engaged to a girl who was leading him on for sport. The night before they were to be married, the girl eloped to another city with Day's friend, who was supposed to have been the best man for Day. When the couple returned from their elopement, they found an unappeaseable Day, who immediately challenged the man to a duel. Both were killed. Although Bierce and Day were too hypersensitive to be compatible, Bierce loved his son and was grief-stricken over Day's death.

⁹¹ De Castro, op. cit., p. 115.

⁹² Neale, op. cit., p. 95.

⁹³ McWilliams, op. cit., p. 175.

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 192.

Soon after Day's death Bierce and Molly separated beyond reconciliation. Either Bierce left his wife or she left him. The issue is not clear with all biographers. Neale states that Molly left Bierce after Bierce had confessed to one of his numerous love affairs. According to Neale, one evening while in an expansive mood, Bierce told Molly about a sojourn he had taken through Southern Europe, during his years in England, with a beautiful young woman. This tour had previously been explained as necessary for Bierce's literary work. To give the rest of the explanation in Neale's words:

Mrs. Bierce had listened to her husband's tale of love of another woman without interposing a word; then, quietly, she left the room....she left never to return.⁹⁵

Bierce's daughter Helen wrote a somewhat different story in which she claims that Bierce was the one who would not be reconciled after an affair of Molly's.⁹⁶ Mrs. Bierce was a beautiful and highly talented woman, and it is not unlikely that she drew the admiration of other men. And, being human, it is quite probable that she was pleased by this admiration, even if she did not encourage it. This seems to have been the case with a Danish architect who had written several warm and admiring letters to Molly. Helen does not claim that her mother encouraged the man, but she does hold her mother at fault for not openly discouraging him and refusing to accept his letters. This apparently one-sided

⁹⁵ Neale, op. cit., p. 134.

⁹⁶ Helen Bierce, op. cit., p. 456.

correspondence did not long continue before Bierce became aware of it, and the fact that his wife had in her possession a letter from another man provoked him beyond reconciliation. McWilliams believes that the fault lay partly with Mrs. Bierce, in the incident suggested by Helen, and partly with Mrs. Day, Molly's mother. As has been mentioned, Mrs. Day did not approve of Bierce from the very beginning, and McWilliams conjectures that she made life nearly unbearable for Bierce during the lean days when he could not provide well for his family.⁹⁷

Perhaps these contradictory stories concerning Bierce's marriage lead biographers de Castro and Grattan to refer vaguely to the marriage and to make no attempt to explain it. It may be that such a casual reference is the fairest to make when all information is uncertain. However, vague allusions often give rise to conclusions far less inaccurate and far more sensational than are the existing accounts. In that case, it is best to give these accounts in order to keep the imagination from going beyond them. If these accounts must be considered, then, which one of them is most logical? From the standpoint of logic, McWilliams' explanation is the most readily acceptable. Had the marriage been harmonious before, it is unlikely that a single incident, either as told by Neale or by Helen, could have caused a separation and a divorce. However, either of these incidents could have climaxed an estrangement which had developed through the years.

⁹⁷ McWilliams, op. cit., p. 188.

During these tragic years - from about 1886 to 1890 - Bierce wrote, or at least published for the first time, his war stories. These appeared in the Examiner and were later published in book form as Tales of Soldiers and Civilians.⁹⁸ This collection was published by Andrew Chatto in England under the title In the Midst of Life,⁹⁹ and it is under this title that the stories now appear in America. Nearly everything that Bierce wrote appeared first in newspapers, later being published in book form. His "Prattle" and strictly journalistic writing continued in much the same style of caustic wit. However deeply he may have felt the tragedy of Day's death and of his separation from Molly, he did not allow that bitterness or sadness, or whatever his emotions were, to creep into his column. In that respect he was a true artist.

The Examiner had a wide circulation, and as chief columnist for that paper, Bierce's fame reached its peak during the 1890's. During this decade he won his greatest journalistic victory. Colis P. Huntington, owner of the Southern Pacific Railway and, according to Bierce, prime embezzler of public funds, was indebted to the federal government for approximately \$75,000,000.¹⁰⁰ This sum was due the government in the 1890's, and Huntington, hoping to delay payment beyond his life time, attempted to push through congress a funding bill - a bill specifically

⁹⁸ Published in 1891.

⁹⁹ Chatto published the book either in late 1891 or in 1892, as soon after the American publication as he could obtain rights.

¹⁰⁰ Grattan, op. cit., p. 68.

designed to postpone payment of the debt 100 years. Obviously, the only ones to benefit from such a bill were Huntington and the Southern Pacific Railway. The pressures of lobbying were not unknown in those days, however, and Huntington had the house stacked to assure passage of the bill. Viewing the situation with less tranquility than did many others, Hearst dispatched Bierce to Washington, D. C., to follow the fate of the funding bill and, in every way possible, to defeat it. Bierce's expose of Huntington, of his designs, and even of those whom Huntington had bribed was so thorough and revealing that the bill was defeated in 1896.

Following this victory Bierce returned to San Francisco and received a hearty welcome. However, life did not hold the same interest for him that it had before. His satire became less brilliant, and the peak of his journalistic career, just so recently reached, was soon passed. Perhaps he was growing tired. He was nearing sixty years of age, and the life of a soldier and a journalist is strenuous. Perhaps the West Coast brought back memories that he had been able partially to forget while he was in Washington. Whatever the reason, Bierce was definitely dissatisfied after he returned from his fight with Huntington. This dissatisfaction led to a request for a transfer to Washington, and, Hearst having approved the transfer, Bierce left for the capitol during the Christmas season of 1899.¹⁰¹ Thus at the age of fifty-seven, he had risen to his zenith and was in the descendent. Most of his short-stories had been written in a

¹⁰¹ McWilliams, op. cit., p. 261.

brief period of about ten years, and he was destined to spend the remainder of his career writing a "watered-down" version of "Prattle."

"Prattle" was left on the West Coast; Bierce's new column was called "The Passing Show." From its content and style, it could well have been written by another man. Bierce became less bitter, less piercing with his satire, and his writing took on a graver, more serious tone. Perhaps he saw the futility in his writing. For many years he had watched people being led by bombastic oratory rather than by thought. He had seen Hearst, through his papers, perpetrate the Spanish-American War and had listened to the oratory of William Jennings Bryan with disgust. Another personal blow struck Bierce soon after he returned to Washington. In March, 1901, Leigh, Bierce's youngest son, died of pneumonia.¹⁰² Leigh had been working for a newspaper in New York, and, although he did not show promise of becoming as great as his father, he was doing quite well. Of more importance to Bierce, however, was the fact that Leigh was the last member of his family remaining close to him. Day had been killed but a few years before; Molly had left him, and Helen, though still living, could not take the place of a son. Hence, when Leigh died, it was a greater grief than the other tragedies. Nearly four years after Leigh's death, Molly died.¹⁰³ This, too, affected Bierce deeply, for, as he told his daughter, "Bibs, your mother is the only woman I ever loved."¹⁰⁴ It is no wonder, then, that Bierce's work

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 269.

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 278.

¹⁰⁴ Helen Bierce, op. cit., p. 456.

in Washington, his writing for the Cosmopolitan, and his column, "The Passing Show", became less forceful. The old man apparently was no longer writing with determination to better the world, but was merely striving to earn his living.

During the last four years of Bierce's stay in Washington, he spent a great deal of his time editing his writing for the Neal Publishing Company, which was to publish his collected works. This task, which finally resulted in twelve volumes, was made easier for Bierce by his secretary, Carrie Christiansen. Neale implies that there was far more between Bierce and his secretary than just the fact that she helped him with his work.¹⁰⁵ He states with some certainty that the two were in love, that the quarters in which they lived in the Olympia Apartments were conveniently close together. Neale suggests that the two might have been secretly married. He further adds to the romance of the relationship by stating that Bierce and Miss Christiansen quarreled before Bierce's disappearance, never to become reconciled.¹⁰⁶

McWilliams refutes Neale's statements completely. McWilliams claims:

But to assume, as Mr. Neale has done, that Bierce was deeply in love with Miss Christiansen is ridiculous. The inference...is repulsed by their correspondence...and by the testimony of those who lived with them.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ Neale, op. cit., p. 136.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., pp. 138-9.

¹⁰⁷ McWilliams, op. cit., p. 273.

The correspondence to which McWilliams refers are the letters, supposedly the last Bierce wrote to Miss Christiansen after Bierce had crossed the Mexican border. Miss Christiansen, however, destroyed these letters, copying excerpts before doing so. Hence, we have only her word that Bierce did cross into Mexico. McWilliams believes the evidence to be sufficient; Neale does not, perhaps because it gives more support to his theory that Bierce committed suicide.

The significant events in Bierce's life having been commented upon, it is perhaps well, before discussing the final known phase of Bierce's life, to consider the attitudes of his biographers toward one another. The four biographers - Grattan, de Castro, Neale, and McWilliams - all published their books in the same year - 1929. Why there should have been a lapse of sixteen years between Bierce's disappearance and the appearance of his first biography and why all four biographies should have appeared at once is an interesting but not satisfactorily explained matter. It is too striking to be mere coincidence. Apparently no effort was made toward recording the "facts" of Bierce's life until after 1920. De Castro did not go to Mexico in search of Villa and of information concerning Bierce until early in the 1920's - long enough after the disappearance for any definite evidence to become obscure. McWilliams started his work in 1923. His research was more methodical and more productive than were the efforts of the other biographers. McWilliams worked six years on his biography of Bierce. Neale began his book in June, 1927. His own excuse for not having written sooner must be taken for what it is worth. Neale states:

Ambrose Bierce has now been dead fifteen years. I reluctantly refused to write of him at an earlier date... despite the repeated urgency of a considerable number of persons. It seemed to me that I was too close to Bierce, that I should wait to see him in perspective; yet, I should not delay so long that memory might become impaired.¹⁰⁸

Neale also claims, as if to establish a priority over all other biographers, that "Over a period of a number of years, immediately preceding Bierce's death, he frequently urged me to become his biographer."¹⁰⁹ Perhaps this request was made, perhaps not. It does seem unusual, to say the least, that he should have waited so long to fulfill a personal request of so dear a friend. Grattan's book seems to have grown from oral and magazine accounts of Bierce's life. There is little, if any, evidence of any original research on the part of Grattan; however, his criticism of Bierce's writing is sound, not over-written as are those eulogies by Neale and de Castro.

The nature of the criticism appearing in the respective biographies bears out the sequence in which they were published. De Castro's appeared first, then Grattan's, Neale's, and McWilliams'.¹¹⁰ McWilliams comments on both Neale's and de Castro's biographies; Neale comments on de Castro's; and de Castro contemplates himself; Grattan does not enter into the personal criticism. Both McWilliams and Neale hold a great contempt for de Castro. McWilliams claims that Bierce hated de Castro; however, de Castro writes as if he believes Bierce deeply loved him. The manifestation

¹⁰⁸ Neale, op. cit., p. 23.

¹⁰⁹ loc. cit.

¹¹⁰ De Castro's biography appeared in February, Grattan's in March, Neale's in June, and McWilliams in December - all of the same year, 1929.

of this love, if such it was, was peculiar indeed, something in the style of a passionate savage, for Bierce is known to have cursed de Castro with eternally damning vehemence and on one occasion to have broken a cane over de Castro's head.¹¹¹ Thus perhaps de Castro may have been attempting to even a score in writing about Bierce, and, by posing as a friend, make his insidious inferences far more effective than if they had come from an enemy. McWilliams alludes to this animosity, on Bierce's part, as follows:

But just as it may be shown that Bierce's antipathy to Pixley, de Young and Huntington, was but an expression of his instinctive aversion to all men who acted as animals, just so may it be shown that Dr. Danziger [de Castro] was on the "black list" for certain definite and very understandable reasons.¹¹²

Neale's attack against de Castro is more direct and vicious than that of McWilliams. Neale does not satisfy himself with restricting the criticism to de Castro's presentation of Bierce; he also makes many scurrilous remarks about de Castro as an individual. Neale does not mention de Castro by name, but refers to him beyond doubt.¹¹³ He claims that he will not call him by any of his many names because notoriety is the one thing this man is seeking. Neale's comment follows:

Particularly agile in spreading reports of Bierce's death was a man with whom the Major came in contact many years ago in San Francisco. To his inventive genius

¹¹¹ The Examiner, July 23, 1893, as quoted by McWilliams, op. cit., p. 217. Note: Dr. Danziger in this article is de Castro.

¹¹² McWilliams, op. cit., p. 153.

¹¹³ Neale, op. cit., pp. 439-41.

principally are to be traced the numerous conflicting accounts...that have been disseminated....After the disappearance of the Major - long enough afterward to leave no doubt that he was dead - this fabricator blossomed into full flower as one of Bierce's dearest friends, his bosom associate long, long years, beautiful years of love, during which they had passed the precious hours with their arms about each other's shoulders, reluctant to lose a second of intellectual and spiritual communion.¹¹⁴

Neale has many more cutting things to say about the dentist who became one of Bierce's biographers.

De Castro says much less about Neale, mentioning his name only once. However, he implies that Neale cheated him out of money which should have come to him for his part of the novella The Monk and the Hangman's Daughter. The authorship of this work has created considerable discussion. De Castro apparently translated the story from the original German and asked Bierce to polish it. Bierce, it appears, took the thread of the story and wove a completely new story from it, retaining only the idea and plot sequence. However, when it was first published, both Bierce's and de Castro's name appeared as co-authors.¹¹⁵ Neale omitted de Castro's name when he published the story, and it was to this slight that de Castro refers.¹¹⁶

Neale has nothing derogatory to say about McWilliams. He even draws from a magazine article by McWilliams for some of his material. However, McWilliams apparently has no particular regard for Neale's treatment of Bierce. The one criticism of Neale already cited marks

¹¹⁴ Loc. cit.

¹¹⁵ De Castro, op. cit., p. 133.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 314-16.

McWilliams' greatest objection to Neale.¹¹⁷ Neale sensationalizes too much. He dwells upon Bierce's sexual life to a disproportionate extent, his only authority being Bierce's own confessions. Who can refute Neale's material when it comes from such a nebulous source? His taste can be criticized, but his facts can not be proved inaccurate. The only legitimate objection is that neither can Neale prove his facts except by claiming his own integrity; and such intangible proof does not suffice for history, which is what biography essentially is.

The mystery of Ambrose Bierce, as was earlier stated, began with his birth. This biography has attempted to show that Bierce moved and lived along no definitely known line, but that he lived on a plane, the nature of which his biographers have only approximated. The inference has been made that perhaps the approximation is not so much a fault of the biographers as it is the result of the variable quality of Ambrose Bierce. He was not the same to everyone. He lived one way, wrote and talked another way, and possibly thought - that is, in his sincere convictions - in still another. Hence, some took Bierce at his word; others correlated his words with his actions; and perhaps a few understood his actual self. Only paradox and mystery evolve from such a life. However, Bierce's life - long and colorful though it was - did not create in its seventy-one years the mystery that his disappearance did.

The facts leading up to that disappearance are in general agreement. After a visit to San Francisco in 1910, Bierce spent most of his days until the autumn of 1913 in and around Washington, editing his writings

¹¹⁷ See footnote 107.

for his Collected Works edition, and revisiting old battlefields.¹¹⁸

His frequent visits to the Army-Navy Club and his entertainment of the young newsmen served as his diversions. Neale adds to these facts a statement that during these last years Bierce often talked about suicide and the "good, good darkness."¹¹⁹ Bierce referred frequently to taking a long, extended trip through South America on foot. Bierce might have told Neale one thing and designed another.¹²⁰ He might have acted with no far-reaching design. He might have left with the desire and intention of returning, although there was little to which he could return. He might have deliberately plotted a mysterious disappearance. Whatever his mental processes might have been, it is rather definite that in the autumn of 1913 Bierce started on a journey to revisit old Civil War battlefields. This journey took him through New Orleans, where a reporter interviewed him. He went from New Orleans through Texas, stopping briefly in Houston, and then disappeared over the border into Mexico. This is the account most widely accepted.¹²¹ Some stories, however, contend that he did not cross the border,¹²² and hardly any two stories agree as to what happened to him if and after he did cross the border.

McWilliams gives no conclusion concerning Bierce's ultimate fate.

¹¹⁹ Neale, op. cit., p. 430.

¹²⁰ It is highly improbable that Bierce, past his seventieth year, seriously planned such an extensive trip on foot.

¹²¹ McWilliams, op. cit., p. 324. See also de Castro, op. cit., p. 320.

¹²² Ibid., p. 331.

He records those which have been given by others, all of which are vague.¹²³ De Castro tells how he met Villa and through finesse drew a confession from him that Bierce had been killed by Villa and his men.¹²⁴ Other sources hold that instead of crossing the Mexican border Bierce went on to California. There, according to different stories, he either was drowned while out boating, or, incognito, he entered an insane asylum.¹²⁵ To these stories, except de Castro's, little credence is given. Neale, of course, takes violent exception to de Castro's explanation, impugns the story by doubting that de Castro even saw Villa, much less talked to him. To throw more force behind his aspersion of de Castro's explanation, Neale offers a theory of his own which, if not accurate, at least is poetic.

Bierce had always talked highly in favor of suicide, a fact significant in that Sterling and Scheffauer, two writers greatly influenced by Bierce, took their own lives. He was not only in favor of suicide for other people but for himself. Neale writes:

For many years before Bierce disappeared, he had told his friends privately, and some of his acquaintances publicly, that he intended to die by his own hand before he should be so advanced in years as to be in danger of senility.¹²⁶

Bierce not only intended to take his own life, but he also had the spot

¹²³ Ibid., pp. 327-32.

¹²⁴ De Castro, op. cit., pp. 332-9.

¹²⁵ McWilliams, op. cit., pp. 331-2.

¹²⁶ Neale, op. cit., p. 429.

selected. It was in Colorado, according to Neale, or at least along the banks of the Colorado River. In the summer of 1912 Bierce had gone on a tour through Arizona and Colorado, and during this trip he had found a place where "the vultures couldn't pick at him"¹²⁷. This place he photographed and showed to Neale.¹²⁷ And Neale believes that it is to this spot that Bierce went in the autumn of 1913. Thus it is that, in referring to de Castro's claim of intimacy with Bierce, Neale says: "What a pity thus to disturb Bierce as he lies in his niche beside the waters of the Colorado!"¹²⁸

Neale's theory is the most arresting of them all. For Bierce it would have been much more glorious to have succumbed through his own will, by his own hand rather than to have been shot ignominiously by a rebel firing squad. But about Neale's theory the most that can be said is that it is no less possible, no more nebulous than the many other stories which have Bierce drowning, dying in an insane asylum, being killed by rebels in Mexico, fighting in World War I in France,¹²⁹ and other stories which visited some writer's imagination as fancy and came forth from his pen as fact.

Fortunately, the manner in which Bierce died has no effect upon the worthiness of his work. The work must stand alone, and it is strong

¹²⁷ Ibid., p. 432.

¹²⁸ Ibid., p. 441.

¹²⁹ New York Times, April 3, 1915. (Bierce's daughter, at that time Mrs. Helen Cowden, was reported to have received a letter from Bierce, who was in France. However, Mrs. Cowden gave no details of the letter to the press and would not, or could not, show it to Neale.)

enough to stand alone once it has been recognized. But there is the task. To bring Bierce's works into wide-spread recognition is difficult. He did not receive acclaim when his contemporaries received theirs. That was the opportune time. Now he must fight against the vast, swirling flood of words pouring from the presses - the flotsam and jetsam of realism and modernism and symbolism. He must fight against these if he is to gain the recognition due him. Perhaps, then, his mysterious disappearance is his best weapon. The mysterious always attracts, and it may be that some read his works out of curiosity after learning of the mystery of his death. That, of course, is the irony of history - call it poetic injustice - that a writer is read, not because of what he has written, but because he chanced to die unconventionally. If Bierce's mystery, then, serves as a buoy to keep his works afloat, vividness and exactness about his life and disappearance have been happily sacrificed.

CHAPTER II

BIERCE'S REPUTATION AS A SHORT-STORY WRITER

Were a statue sculptured to commemorate Ambrose Bierce, it would likely hold in its right hand a rapier - symbol of the San Francisco journalist's brilliant, satiric wit. It is for his relentless satire that Bierce is generally remembered. The few biographies which preserve him for posterity, though inconsistent with one another and indefinite, enthusiastically present him as the nineteenth century monarch of California letters, the critic above whom none other existed. Commanding the public eye through his columns - the "Town Crier" and later "Prattle" - from 1870 throughout the century, Bierce scorched the pages of San Francisco journals with vituperative, personal satire. He attacked every upstart poet or aspiring short-story writer who dared to submit his efforts for publication. The more bitter these attacks, the more biographers have praised them, labeling the venomous journalism as critical genius. That Bierce was a master stylist cannot be denied. He wrote laconically, penetratingly, and his cleverness was all the greater for it. His vocabulary was unusually well chosen; his facility for selecting the most fitting word stands out in all his writing. In "Oil of Dog" the business in which the author's mother is engaged - she "disposes of unwelcome babies" - is referred to innocently as an honest and an humble industry.¹ And is not disposing of unwelcome babies an

¹ Bierce, "Oil of Dog," Collected Writings (New York: The Citadel Press, 1946), p. 800.

humble and honorable profession? It may not be, but Bierce successfully creates the impression that it is.

Although his clever phrasing enhanced the effectiveness of Bierce's journalistic tirades, it is not for these personal invectives that he should be remembered, but for his short-stories. A quasi-cynic with a flair for writing can write good satire,² but it takes a thinker who is a master of style and language to write a lasting short-story. Hence, if ever a statue is fashioned in memory of Bierce, a golden quill, not a rapier, should be placed in its hand, for his short-stories are Bierce's contribution to American letters.

Neale depicts Bierce as master of all literary forms. Essay, poetry, short-story - Bierce excelled in all, according to Neale; he was also a brilliant logician and wrote parables which surpassed Christ's, fables which excelled Aesop's, epigrams, proverbs, and maxims to which La Rochefoucauld would have bowed. Nor could Aristotle, Poe, or Lanier excel Bierce's critical ability.³

That Bierce excelled as a short-story writer is seen through analysis; however, that this mastery extended into all other literary fields is questionable. Bierce's critical essays and his verses scintillate with wit and cleverness; but wit and cleverness are not criticism, nor is perfectly metered verse poetry. As a literary craftsman, Bierce was a good versifier, a talent he used frequently in lampooning his political and literary antagonists, but satiric parody is not poetry.

² Note the overabundance of columnists in the daily newspapers who have satire as their forte.

³ Walter Neale, Life of Ambrose Bierce (New York: Walter Neale, publisher, 1929), p. 455.

Bierce did write a few poems. None which he allowed the world to see, however, are particularly profound or eloquent. His "Invocation", perhaps the best poetry that he produced, is not impressive enough to quote at length, but one stanza is given to show that it echoes the invocation in Tennyson's "In Memoriam".

Goddess of Liberty! Lo, thou
Whose tearless eyes behold the chain
And look unmoved upon the slain⁴
Eternal peace upon thy brow, -

The poem is important, however, in that it shows a philosophy more congenial to mankind than is seen in Bierce's journalistic barbs. That this philosophy was actually the sincere, prevailing philosophy of Bierce is an interesting premise held by de Castro.⁵ De Castro also looks upon Bierce as a great poet. He is even more enthusiastic about Bierce's poetry than is Neale. Referring to Bierce's love for Molly, de Castro writes, "With this love came also the tenderest emotional expressions from Bierce's pen. These, many of them beautiful in extreme, establish Bierce as a very great poet."⁶ De Castro continues that had Bierce not destroyed these poems because "he was ashamed to show this side of his nature", he would be established as a lyric poet "not less than Heine".⁷ It would be interesting to read these love lyrics; how-

⁴ Adolphe Castro, Portrait of Ambrose Bierce (New York: Century Press, 1929), p. 231, citing Bierce's "Invocation".

⁵ Ibid., pp. 53-5.

⁶ Ibid., p. 28.

⁷ Loc. cit.

ever, it is unlikely that Bierce would have destroyed them had he thought them worthy of a niche in American letters or in the love poetry of the world. Had he been too sensitive to claim the poems as his own, he could have subscribed another name to them. He was to use *nom de plumes* later.

De Castro believes that Bierce's poetic genius was suppressed by circumstances. One major incident was Bierce's failure to obtain the well-paying public relations job with the Southern Pacific Railway, headed by Colis P. Huntington.⁸ Bierce wanted the financial independence concomitant with the railway position so that he could devote his time to the "versification of tales that were dormant in his mind, to narrative verse somewhat after the manner of Byron."⁹ However, Bierce failed to get the job and had to grub for a living the rest of his life. Concerning the failure to get this job, de Castro says, "It is not unlikely that in the press of circumstance around Bierce at this time, America lost a major epic poet."¹⁰ This, if true, is to be regretted. America has room for another epic poet to stand beside Stephen Vincent Benet. However, history disproves de Castro's theory. Neither dire physical adversities nor inward struggles have thwarted the efforts of the world's great poets. In fact, poets have thrived on poverty, consumption and popular rejection. From their maladjustments has sprung poetry.

In criticism Bierce fared little better than in poetry. Some of

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

⁹ *loc. cit.*

¹⁰ *loc. cit.*

his critical essays are delightful reading today, but that does not mean that he was an able critic, merely that he was an excellent writer. Bierce loved invective, as is apparent in all his journalistic writing, and this love played him false in his criticism. He sacrificed truth for effect. His vitriolic attack against David Lezinsky, a young Jewish poet, caused Lezinsky to commit suicide.¹¹ When Bierce learned of this he said, "I knew he would. It is the only decent thing he ever did!"¹² This, if true, is certainly a mark against Bierce's literary decency and criticism. A critic may censor an author's works as severely as his judgement dictates, but he is never justified in censoring an author for trying.

Bierce was too sensitive to be just critic. His perception was too keen, and in his demand for perfection he often failed to consider one of the most important points in criticism - "Did the author achieve his purpose?" As a perfectionist for style, Bierce tended to analyze the word and to ignore the spirit. Bierce's "feminine sense of value", as described by McWilliams, was instinctive and idealistic.¹³ Certainly, then, the Rabelaisian temperament of San Francisco was not the harmonious environment for Bierce, nor was the world. The clash between Bierce's idealistic demands and the vulgarities of crude San Francisco wrought mutual destruction. The environment perverted Bierce's idealism, and

¹¹ Ibid., p. 194.

¹² Ibid., p. 197.

¹³ See Chap. I, footnote 28.

Bierce, a hypersensitive perfectionist, could not understand his environment. His criticism, consequently, was often invalid. A critic must understand that which he criticizes if he is to criticize justly.

Bierce is commendable, however, in that he did not, in later years, consider himself a critic. In 1903 he wrote to Sterling:

You make me shudder when you say you are reading the "Prattle" of the years. I haven't it and should hardly dare to read it if I had. There is so much in it to deplore - so much that is not wise - so much that was not altogether sincere - so many half truths, and so forth. Make allowances, I beg, and where you cannot, just forgive.¹⁴

Upon retrospection Bierce became a more capable critic than when clashing personalities and incidents inspired him.

This refutation, in part, of Neale's sweeping acclamation of Bierce is made not to discredit Bierce as a poet or critic, but to focus attention on his short-stories, his greatest literary achievements. Although he was the first West Coast journalist of any stature, and perhaps the greatest one in the field of personal satire, Bierce's importance in journalism is minor. Strict libel laws and capitalistic control of newspapers have practically forced vituperation, - truth and the necessity of a purgative notwithstanding -, from American journalism. Fortunately, however, literature has not been restricted in this manner, and the elements of a good short-story remain much the same today as they did in the time of Bierce.

¹⁴ C. Hartley Grattan, Bitter Bierce (Garden City: Doubleday, Doran and Company, 1929), p. 61, citing Bierce's letter to Sterling.

Yet, Bierce is not generally accepted as an outstanding short-story writer; of thirty-six books dealing with American short-stories examined, only six mention Bierce or include any of his works. Of more significance, perhaps, is the fact that the Literary History of the United States, by Spiller, Thorp, Johnson, and Canby, dismisses Bierce in two pages although it does recognize him in a brief two-page bibliography of his work and of critical material. It may take another generation or longer for Bierce to come into his own in a literary sense. If an author is not accepted in his time, scholars of a later generation often fail to resurrect him, just as they often neglect to bury an author who, accepted widely in his own era, has been relegated to obscurity by the ever-shifting philosophies of art, religion, politics, and life in general. Thus it is with Bierce. The citizenry of the West Coast, as long as they were not in direct line of attack, applauded his voluminous satiric outpourings, and the Easterners were amused by him as a reaction of the frontier - as long as he stayed at the frontier. When he came into their midst with his short-stories and verse, however, the Easterners recoiled. They had been brought up by the too-proper code of William Dean Howells, and to have accepted the shocking, unconventional stories of Bierce would have been too much.¹⁵

Receiving no popular acclaim as a short-story writer in his own era, Bierce has never, at any time, been widely accepted by either the reading public or the anthologists. Most of the biographies and short articles

¹⁵ De Castro tells of Mrs. Phoebe Hearst's rejection of Bierce's Black Beetles in Amber. When de Castro told her that the verses were to be published, Mrs. Hearst answered, "It is not advisable to put a curse in covers, Doctor." (See de Castro, op. cit., p. 146.) This censure, though of a book of poetry, indicates the reception which Bierce, as a short-story writer, received in his time.

on Bierce appeared in the late 1920's and early 1930's.¹⁶ It is significant to note, however, that the anthologies of American short-stories published in the same decade choose, for the most part, to ignore Bierce entirely. Nor had earlier anthologies treated favorably the author of In the Midst of Life and Can Such Things Be? Robert L. Ramsey's compilation of short-stories, published in 1921 under the title Short Stories in America, includes none of Bierce's tales.¹⁷ Pattee, however, in The Development of the American Short Story, published in 1923, deems Bierce worthy of mention. However, he assumes no definite attitude toward Bierce. First, finding fault with him for being "deliberately out of step and defiant,"¹⁸ Pattee grants Bierce supreme literary technique, but denies him catharsis. Yet, after denying him catharsis, Pattee

¹⁶ McWilliams, Neale, Grattan, and de Castro all published their biographies of Bierce in 1929. Bierce short-stories and articles about Bierce appearing from 1929-32 include: Ambrose Bierce, "Affair of Outposts," Mentor, 18:42-4, July, 1930; Ambrose Bierce, "Ant and the Grain of Corn," Golden Book, 13:31, March, 1931; Ambrose Bierce, "Horseman in the Sky," Golden Book, 11:87-9, May, 1930; S. B. Dickson, "Ambrose Bierce," Sunset, 63:15-6, October, 1929; Carey McWilliams, "Ambrose Bierce," American Mercury, 16:21-2, February, 1929; H. L. Mencken, "Ambrose Bierce Mystery," American Mercury, 18:724-6, September, 1929; Carey McWilliams, "Mystery of Ambrose Bierce," American Mercury, 22:330-7, March, 1931.

¹⁷ Other significant anthologies from 1913 through subsequent years which do not consider Bierce are as follows: E. A. Cross, ed., A Book of the Short Story; William Thomson Hastings, Benjamin Crocker Clough, and Kenneth Oliver Mason, eds., Short Story, "A Collection of Types of the Short Story"; Benjamin A. Heydrick, ed., Types of the Short Story; Frederick Law, ed., Modern Short Stories; Kenneth Allan Robinson, ed., Contemporary Short Stories; H. C. Schweikert, ed., Short Stories; and Cynthia Ann Pugh, ed., A Book of Short Stories.

¹⁸ Fred Lewis Pattee, The Development of the American Short Story (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1923), p. 302.

writes, "Many of his [Bierce's] stories really begin where the last sentence ends....It is the last touch of art which compels the reader to search his own soul."¹⁹ This may not be the "catharsis" which makes the reader sigh, as he does after reading about the death of Little Nell, but if it makes the reader "probe his own soul", what else would one call it? One does not lay a Bierce short-story down and forget it immediately, or for a long time afterward. But Pattee, apparently fearing that he has leaned too far to one side, writes this equalizing statement:

When, however, one studies the American short-story evolution, not from the point of view of what might have been but of what actually happened, one is compelled to the conclusion that Ambrose Bierce was a vivid episode rather than a positive force.²⁰

McWilliams suggests that Pattee mentioned Bierce only because the Neale Publishing Company published an expensive edition of Bierce's Collected Works, limited to 250 copies. Pattee wrote to Neale, asking, "Is Bierce really a great writer?"²¹ This type of publication was unusual for any but a writer of established importance. Hence, Pattee wrote Neale asking whether Bierce's books had sold, whether the public had liked them. Neale claims to have scorned Pattee's letter, objecting that book sales do not determine the worth of an author.²²

By 1936 Bierce was still not considered significant enough by

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 305.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 306.

²¹ Carey McWilliams, Ambrose Bierce. (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1929), p. 10.

²² Neale, op. cit., p. 404.

N. Bryllion Fagin to be included in America Through the Short Story. Yet, the anthology is widely representative. Among Fagin's selection are, of course, the standard short-story writers - Bret Harte, Hamlin Garland, George Washington Cable, Sarah Orne Jewett, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, and Harriet Beecher Stowe - and several lesser ones such as Kate Chopin, Grace King, Mary Murfee, Constance Fenimore Woolson, and Rose Terry. That Bierce was omitted entirely is more striking in that one division of Fagin's book is devoted to war stories. In a survey of American fiction, Quinn comments on Bierce's short-stories without enthusiasm, considering him primarily as a journalist.²³ Apparently, the small group of Bierce's short-story readers, which Neale thought to be increasing, is still not an overpopulous clan.

However, an indication that the group, whatever its size may be, is active is seen in the 1947 publication of The Golden Argosy,²⁴ an anthology of American and English short-stories. "The Damned Thing", the Bierce story selected by the editors of The Golden Argosy, is also included in the Greatest Short Stories, published in 1940.²⁵ This five-volume work is based on selections from all countries and eras. In 1946 The Collected Writings of Ambrose Bierce, which includes all of

²³ Arthur Hobson Quinn, American Fiction (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1936), pp. 521-5.

²⁴ Charles Grayson and Van H. Cartmell, eds., The Golden Argosy (New York: The Dial Press, 1947), pp. 56-63.

²⁵ P. F. Collier and Son, eds., Greatest Short Stories, Vol. II (New York: P. F. Collier and Son Corporation, 1940), pp. 241-54.

Bierce's short-stories, was published by the Citadel Press.

Perhaps a new attempt to resuscitate Bierce as a short-story writer is growing from this recent recognition in anthologies. If so, it will be the fifth attempt in five decades. In 1918 an article appeared in an issue of Current Opinion commenting on Bierce's "persistent obscurity".

The persistent obscurity of Ambrose Bierce's genius is the more puzzling because of the praise that has been lavished upon his work by the most discriminating critics of England and America.²⁶

Prompted by a recent publication of Bierce's In the Midst of Life, the article stated that this was the third time in three decades that an attempt to establish Bierce as a major literary figure had been made.²⁷

Again in 1929, when the four biographies of Bierce were published, a fourth attempt to establish him was made. These efforts, however, have never been successful. The interest they built up has been short lived.²⁸

Consequently, the majority of American readers who are familiar with Bret Harte, Stephen Crane, O. Henry, and Hamlin Garland, to name a few of the short-story writers of Bierce's time, have no knowledge of Bierce.²⁹ Per-

²⁶ Anonymous, "Another Attempt to Boost Bierce into Immortality," Current Opinion, 65:184, September, 1918.

²⁷ loc. cit.

²⁸ In 1942, one hundred years after Bierce was born, only one tribute was paid him. Paul H. Oehser, editor of United States National Museum, lamented that a great injustice had been done literature and Bierce by neglecting to observe his centenary. See "Letters to the Editor," Saturday Review of Literature, November 21, 1942.

²⁹ It has become a daily experience with me to answer inquiries concerning my research, and when I mention Bierce, I am rewarded generally with blank expressions. One student of government remembered him only as an international incident - Bierce's supposed execution by Villa; another student thought that Bierce was a character created by James Thurber.

haps that is because Bierce's short-stories are never included in readers used in grammar and high school literature courses.

Another and probably more decisive reason for Bierce's lack of recognition lies in the inability of the average reader to appreciate fully the intensity of Bierce's writing, more English than American in style.³⁰ The action in his stories is seldom solely adventurous; it is either psychological or psychological and adventurous. As a matter of fact, the themes of his stories are repetitious. His art is in his thought and, more particularly, in the expression of the thought. His brief descriptions show an unexcelled graphic brilliance. His writing has the essence of nobility divested of the pomp of nobility. Hence, as Wilson Follett states it, "It is not his [Bierce's] fault if there are few who understand that kind of nobility. It is his misfortune - and the more serious misfortune of those who do not understand."³¹ Perhaps, then, an analysis of Bierce's short-stories will result in³ clearer understanding and, consequently, in a fuller appreciation of Bierce's contribution to American letters.

³⁰ Kathleen Barratt, English novelist and instructor of English in Training College, Swansea, Wales, stated in an interview that Bierce is widely read in England and that he is regarded as a prominent pioneer in the field of short-story development.

³¹ Wilson Follett, "America's Neglected Satirist," Dial, 65:52, July 18, 1918.

CHAPTER III

ANALYSIS OF BIERCE'S SHORT-STORIES

Chapter II has suggested that Bierce was a good short-story writer and that his stories deserve a better reception than they have received. This chapter will present an objective analysis of his stories and will consider both the limitations and excellent qualities. Neither the short-comings nor the good points will be discussed separately as such, however, but will be noted as they appear in relation to the main points of analysis.

The predominant central theme of Bierce's stories will be considered first. Of his sixty-eight published tales all but two deal with death. Death is the principal protagonist, appearing in some of the stories in a single but unique visitation and bursting forth in others with uncontrolled violence. This obsession with death prevails not only as a central theme, but also exists in heavy overtones. "The Coup de Grace" furnishes a vivid illustration of both motifs. The following excerpts from the first five paragraphs of this story illustrate the over-tone motif:

As far as one could see through the forests, among the splintered trees, lay wrecks of men and horses....The dead were collected in groups of a dozen or a score and laid side by side in rows while trenches were dug to receive them....At some little distance from the spot where one of the burial parties had established its 'biyouac of the dead', a man in the uniform of a Federal officer stood leaning against a tree....The dead on his right hand and on his left were unregarded as he passed. An occasional low moan from some sorely-stricken wretch whom the relief parties had not reached, and who would have to pass a

comfortless night beneath the stars with his thirst to keep him company, was equally unheeded....At the head of a shallow ravine, a mere depression of the ground, lay a small group of bodies.¹

Thus a macabre atmosphere is established as a prologue to the central incident of the story - that of soldier's body mutilated by swine.

If one is searching for a balance of tragedy and comedy, of levity and seriousness, or for a romantic love element in Bierce's stories, then his obsession with death appears an obvious limitation. Death entering softly into quiet chambers is tolerable, may even evoke a compassionate sigh, or stir something still deeper in the reader; however, death rampant with the omnipresence of the wind and with the violence of an' earthquake repels the casual reader who has not prepared himself for the experience.² At first consideration, this limitation may appear great enough to relegate the stories into a well deserved obscurity. However, there are good qualities enough to preserve them and to provide excellent reading for him who understands the motive behind them and who adapts his attitude accordingly.

So closely related to the central theme that it must be discussed in connection with it is the motive, or purpose, of the stories. Considering first the purpose of In the Midst of Life, one sees that in these

¹ Ambrose Bierce, "The Coup de Grace," Collected Writings (New York: Citadel Press, 1946), pp. 54-5.

² One anonymous reviewer of Bierce's stories quoted a friend: "O yes. I read them years ago, and shall never forget them. But I could never read them again. They are too terrible." See "An English Tribute to the Genius of Ambrose Bierce," Current Opinion, 58:472, June, 1915.

stories Bierce was impelled by the desire to present realistic pictures of the war. And certainly there is no one idea that so completely expresses the devastating sweep of war as does the idea of death. The glory of victory is dimmed by the thought of death, for victory is defeat for those who lose their lives in winning it. In war death strikes in many ways - through diseases, mortal wounds, exhaustion, shock, fear -, and it is precipitated by many things - vain courage, carelessness, ignorance, bad luck, lack of defense. It is in these manifold aspects of death that Bierce finds the variations for the themes of his stories, and these themes become psychological. Bierce deals with the physical aspects of death only inasmuch as it serves to provide the setting for the reaction of his characters to it. Soldiers react differently in the face of death. Some dare death, defy it, as did Lieutenant Brayle in "Killed at Resaca"; some evade it successfully for months, only to be overcome eventually by the great odds; still others cower from it, but to no avail; and remaining indisputably certain over all is the fact that death conquers at last.

The psychological reaction can be so intense that it brings death, unassisted by outside forces. In "One of the Missing" Jerome Searing, an intrepid scout, has fearlessly risked the perils of spying on enemy positions many times, and always he has come back. His courage, however, is not the kind to sustain him through one violent experience - his last one. Caught in a farm house when it was shelled, Searing is pinned between timbers of the building. He is apparently uninjured,

but he cannot move his arms because of the timbers. He does not despair of his situation until he realizes that the muzzle of his rifle, which fell from him during the explosion, is aimed directly at his forehead. He is pinned so tightly that he cannot move his head out of the range of the rifle. For the first time he knows fear. Expecting the rifle to be discharged at any moment, Searing dies of fright. The rifle is not loaded.

A psychological problem of an entirely different nature faces Captain Coulter in "The Affair at Coulter's Notch." Coulter, a Southerner by birth, is a gunner in the Federal Army, and on one occasion he is ordered to fire on a Southern mansion - his home, wherein his wife and child still live. The problem is apparent. He must choose between love of family and honor and duty.

A dream of escape and reunion with his wife flashes through the mind of Peyton Farquhar from the time he drops through the gallows until the rope breaks his neck in "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge." Thus Bierce employs a common psychological technique, but in reverse. Farquhar's un-lived future, not his past, rushes through his mind. In "The Story of a Conscience" Captain Hartroy sentences to the firing squad a man who earlier saved his life; then, stung by his conscience for this deed, the captain commits suicide.

Thus throughout the fifteen war tales making up In the Midst of Life Bierce depicts the realism of war. He seems closer to war in his episodic stories than do those who try to present a vast panorama of war and all its effects, for there is none to whom the war is as real as

to him who is fighting it. That Bierce's competence as a writer of war stories is recognized is seen in the following criticism by Leroy J.

Nations:

Bierce yields to no man in his stories of war and his tales of atavistic terror. Stephen Crane in his The Red Badge of Courage, Zola in his Debacle, Tolstoi in his War and Peace paint the veracity of war in feeble colors.³

Nations, unlike Quinn, recognizes the realism in Bierce's stories and criticizes accordingly. Quinn, however, condemns Bierce's short-stories. Quinn declares that Bierce failed in many of his stories because he went beyond the point of tragedy to arrive at horror and, consequently, though not intentionally, aroused disgust. Referring specifically to "The Coup de Grace", in which the body of a sergeant is partially eaten by swine, Quinn says: "He [Bierce] did not seem to understand that such details even if based upon actual facts in such a case destroy the effect tried for, for no tragic situation can stand the creation of disgust" Quinn is right, of course, in his observation that tragedy cannot sustained along with disgust; however, he errs in supposing that Bierce strove for tragedy, at least not for dramatic tragedy. Bierce's purpose was to present war realistically, and if that meant showing too many gory intestines, then the readers with squeamish stomachs would have to be sacrificed, not the veritable nature of war.

³ Leroy J. Nations, "The Gray Wolf of American Letters," South Atlantic Quarterly, 25:264, July, 1926.

⁴ Arthur Hobson Quinn, American Fiction (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1936), p. 624.

Although Bierce presented a realistic picture of war, he was not a realist. His final impressions - those of the dreaded awfulness of war - are realistic, but his methods in arriving at these impressions are more romantic than realistic. The two most striking romantic elements appearing in all of Bierce's stories are his depictions of nature as integral parts of characters and the use of gothic supernaturalism as impressionistic backgrounds. In "A Horseman in the Sky" some supernatural force awakens a sleeping sentinel:

Without a movement, without a sound, in the profound silence and the languor of the late afternoon, some invisible messenger of fate touched with unsealing finger the eyes of his consciousness - whispered into the ear of his spirit the mysterious awakening word which no human lips ever have spoken, no human memory ever has recalled.⁵

And in the same story landscape is so closely blended with one of the characters that it becomes a part of him.

On a colossal pedestal, the cliff, - motionless at the extreme edge of the capping rock and sharply outlined against the sky, - was an equestrian statue of impressive dignity....The gray costume harmonized with its aerial background; the metal of accoutrement and caparison was softened and subdued by the shadow; the animal's skin had no points of high light....In silhouette against the sky the profile of the horse was cut with the sharpness of a cameo; it looked across the heights of air to the confronting cliffs beyond. The face of the rider, turned slightly away, showed only an outline of temple and beard; he was looking downward to the bottom of the valley.⁶

In view of the general assumption of Bierce's biographers and critics that his forte was satire and that he was a bitter cynic, it cannot be too often emphasized that Bierce's short-stories are not pre-

⁵ Bierce, "A Horseman in the Sky," op. cit., p. 5.

⁶ Loc. cit.

dominantly satirical or cynical. Irony is employed occasionally, it is true, as in the case of Jerome Searing, who survives many perilous scouting adventures only to die of needless fright; or as in the case of Captain Coulter, who is commanded to fire upon his home; much of war is ironical, however, and Bierce's recognition of this adds to the realism of his depiction rather than reflects any personal cynicism.

Satire and bitterness appear to an even lesser extent in Can Such Things Be? As in In the Midst of Life, however, these stories of the supernatural have death as their central theme. Thus does death serve to intensify both the realistic and the unrealistic. Although one ~~can~~ ask "What is more natural or certain than death?", he can ask with equal intelligence, "What is more supernatural or uncertain than death?" Of course, death in these two questions carries different connotations. In the former, death is the abrupt ending of life, and it is with this death that Bierce deals in his war stories. In the latter sense, however, death connotes that which follows the end of physical existence, and it is with this mystery that Bierce is concerned in his tales of the supernatural. All that is known of death is that the body after death is inanimate and will eventually decompose. What becomes of the animating spark no one knows, but its disposition remains eternally an object of conjecture. Many of these conjectures appear either as religious or as philosophical precepts. Others, however, are admitted fantasies of imagination. Thus it is with Bierce's Can Such Things Be? These stories deal with the mysterious ways in which death claims its victims and with the medium in which these victims' ghosts exist once they have

left their bodies. Thus in "The Moonlit Road" the violent death of Julia Hetman is logically explained; however, that after her death she could appear before both her husband and her son and be seen only by her husband is not explained. Indeed, how could it be? In at least two stories death comes to the main characters in cemeteries.⁷ They are found lying on the graves of their mothers. In the stories, however, it is established that it was impossible that either of these characters could have known while still alive the existence of his mother's grave.

With the different treatment of death in Can Such Things Be? is a different purpose than appears in In the Midst of Life. Whereas in the war stories Bierce recalled much of what he had actually seen and experienced, in his tales of the supernatural his purpose appears to have been merely to entertain. He certainly did not feel that his stories bordered on truth or even on possibility. He scorned religion and did not believe in immortality, and for the practice of spiritualism he held nothing but contempt.⁸ He considered spiritualists either frauds or fools and satirized them in "Prattle." Considering his disdain for spiritualism, one may expect Bierce to have satirized it in his stories; however, he did not do so. In fact, he even employed a medium in some of his tales, such as "The Moonlit Road," as a device through which to relate in first person the experiences of the dead. He wrote these

⁷ These stories are "The Death of Halpin Frayser" and "A Baby Tramp."

⁸ Franklin Walker, San Francisco's Literary Frontier (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1939), p. 252. See also Neale, op. cit., p. 157.

stories for no moral purpose, but to entertain. As ^{been}hasⁿ established in his biography, Bierce was generally in the need of money. Hence, it is entirely plausible that he wrote supernatural stories because he thought that they would sell the best. Certainly, in the 1890's, during which time he wrote most of the tales, spiritualism was a fad in America, and especially on the Pacific Coast.⁹

Thus it is seen that death is properly the central theme in Can Such Things Be? and in In the Midst of Life. However, why should Bierce carry such a sombre theme as death into his grotesquely morbid stories of humor compiled under Negligible Tales and The Parenticide Club? Although death may seem to be a subject for sober treatment only, it lends itself quite readily to humor when pushed to the point of absurdity; and Bierce continually pushes death to this point and beyond. In an "Imperfect Conflagration" the narrator calmly relates the manner in which he murdered his father in their library. The deed having been accomplished, he felt uneasy, fearing that his mother might detect it; consequently, "Under the circumstances I thought it expedient to remove her also, which I did."¹⁰ That is all the detail that the murder of his mother merits. In other stories, however, the nature and method of murder is exaggerated to a point that goes beyond reason.¹¹

⁹ Ibid., pp. 201-6.

¹⁰ Bierce, "An Imperfect Conflagration," op. cit., p. 805.

¹¹ See Chapter I, footnote 35.

The central theme and motives of Bierce's short-stories have been discussed. A more individual aspect of his tales should now be considered - that of style. Subject matter for stories is limited to the extent that it is repeated over and over, the style, for the most part, must determine whether a story is good. Mere accurate reporting of facts is not enough. Something more individual is required. And Bierce's style alone is enough to establish him as a lasting short-story writer.

Most significant in the aspects of Bierce's style is his ability to sum up a situation tersely and compactly in a brief paragraph or in a single sentence. What Robertson said of Voltaire may also be said of Bierce. "Some men can be prolix in one brief story; [Bierce] is terse through a hundred."¹² His stories are short, his longest containing few more than 4000 words, but they are filled with pertinent detail; and when the reader has completed a story, he feels that his experience is complete. Bierce's appreciation of the soldier's attitude toward his enemy is tersely, but thoroughly, expressed in "A Son of the Gods":

The soldier never becomes wholly familiar with the conception of his foes as men like himself; he cannot divest himself of the feeling that they are another order of beings, differently conditioned, in an environment not altogether of the earth. The smallest vestiges of them rivet his attention and engage his interest. He thinks of them as inaccessible; and, catching an unexpected glimpse of them, they appear farther away, and therefore larger, than they really are - like objects in a fog. He is somewhat in awe of them.¹³

¹² J. M. Robertson, Voltaire (London: Watts & Company, 1922), p. 87.

¹³ Bierce, "A Son of the Gods," op. cit., pp. 24-5.¹

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Or in the conclusion to this story, one of the few times in which Bierce shows any feeling or sympathy for the dying or the dead, he draws compactly the futile desperation of death:

Ah, those many, many needless dead! That great soul whose body is lying over yonder, so conspicuous against the sere hillside - could it not have been spared the bitter consciousness of a vain devotion? Would one exception have marred too much the pitiless perfection of the divine eternal plan?¹⁴ ✕ ✕

Bierce's terse compactness is adaptable to modern realism, but not so his vocabulary and diction. Bierce was a martinet with the English language. His obsession with perfection of phrasing and grammar often led him to over-correct writing. He thought that dialect and slang were a disgrace to literature and refused to use them consciously in his stories.¹⁵ Thus even in battle Bierce's soldiers often speak with the measured precision of a grammarian calmly addressing his class. In "One Kind of Officer," following a chaos in which two companies of the Union Army were fighting one another, an officer is asked to explain why he had not attempted to stop the wholesale slaughter. His reply: "During the engagement I discovered the state of affairs, and apprised the commander of the battery. I ventured to urge that the firing cease. I was insulted and ordered to my post."¹⁶ Such speech scarcely fits the battlefield. Nor does the composed speech of the spy who has been sentenced to death in

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 29.

¹⁵ Neale, op. cit., p. 364.

¹⁶ Bierce, "One Kind of Officer," op. cit., p. 89.

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72

"Parker Adderson, Philosopher". Having been sentenced to be shot, the spy philosophizes:

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"A loss of which we shall never be conscious can be borne with composure and therefore expected without apprehension. You must have observed, General, that of all the dead men with whom it is your soldierly pleasure to strew your path none shows signs of regret."¹⁷

To be considered with the formality of dialogue is the Latinity of Bierce's vocabulary.¹⁸ In the California of Bierce's time, new words, American words, were constantly used to fit new patterns of life. Bierce, however, brushed the colloquialisms and much of the new idiom aside, apparently feeling more certain of himself with Latin derivatives. Consequently, to Bierce a hill is an acclivity, a valley is a declivity. Bierce seldom meets, he encounters; his sights are spectacles; he relates instead of tells.

These two characteristics of Bierce's style - the precise dialogue and the Latinized vocabulary - give a certain stiffness to his stories; however, they appear essential to the succinct, epigrammatic characteristics * of his style. When the formal dialogue is replaced by the more slovenly speech of daily usage and when the Latinized terms are replaced by briefer, American words, the impact of Bierce's writing becomes weakened. The mechanism of his stories then loses its perfection.

¹⁷ Ibid., "Parker Adderson, Philosopher," p. 69.

¹⁸ The most vivid illustrations of the formality and Latinity appear in Bierce's The Devil's Dictionary, a compilation of Bierce's most brilliant epigrammatic wit.

Perhaps the most significant excellence of Bierce's style is the overall structure of his stories. His stories are episodic in construction. They do not often adhere to a standard short-story form. For one thing, the tales do not have a continuous, unbroken movement, but are often divided into abrupt and, at first glance, apparently unrelated episodes. These minor episodes, however, distant and unrelated though they may seem at first, are always correlated and justified in the end. Thus, Bierce eliminates transitional padding. He takes from a character's past only that which is immediately pertinent to the story and feels no obligation to tie the fragment of the past to the present with any biographical thread. By divesting his stories of minor details, Bierce demands from his readers a more alert attention than might otherwise be necessary. There is little in Bierce's stories that is not pertinent to their development. As is true with the formal dialogue and the Latinized vocabulary, Bierce's absolute brevity, his episodic style, is necessary to the compactness of his stories. The desired impact - fear, horror, whatever it may be - comes more swiftly and solidly because of Bierce's economy of minor details.

One more point concerning the episodic aspect of Bierce's stories can be made. To what extent Bierce influenced later writers is indeterminable. Clifton Fadiman claims that Bierce has been a noticeable influence on H. L. Mencken and writers of the Pacific Coast during the more than a quarter of a century since his death.¹⁹ Fadiman does not elaborate this statement, perhaps because it would have been too difficult to find substantiating proof. Bierce may or may not have influenced later writers; however, his

¹⁹ Ibid., Clifton Fadiman, introduction, p. xiv.

style anticipated the tendency toward episodic writing seen in many contemporary short-stories; and the psychological element which he employed is evident in many modern stories. One can conjecture then that perhaps the reason for Bierce's not being well received in his own time was that he was ahead of his age in style and technique.

Especially suited to the episodic style of Bierce's short-stories are their surprise endings. The term "shock endings" could be more appropriately applied, for the endings are often startling as well as surprising. Although the surprise ending has fallen in grace, Bierce escapes the criticism directed against surprise endings as such. His stories are not mere framework for his endings, and his endings serve a primary purpose other than to create surprise. The surprise is only secondary. Primarily, the ending is to effect a sudden emotion in the reader. A feeling of tragedy, fear, hate, or despair often overwhelms the reader as the realization of what has happened comes to him.

One of the most effective stories to illustrate this sudden emotion is "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge". Peyton Farquhar, a Southern planter, steps out of his role of civilian briefly in an effort to help the Confederate cause by blowing up a bridge. He is caught by the Federal forces and is sentenced to hang. As he falls from the gallows he feels the rope become taut and then, it seems to him, to break. Most of the story concerns Farquhar's escape, his luck in dodging the pursuing bullets, and, finally, his reunion with his family. Just as he is ready to take his wife into his arms, all becomes darkness and silence. And then: "Peyton Farquhar was dead; his body, with a broken neck, swung gently

from side to side beneath the timbers of Owl Creek Bridge."²⁰ Thus Bierce leaves the reader grasping desperately for something to cling to. The feeling is similar to that of falling suddenly and unexpectedly. It is a feeling of complete helplessness and, as Pattee expresses it, causes the reader "to search his own soul."

The different characteristics of Bierce's stories - the central theme, purpose, and style - have been analyzed. It is now necessary to observe the way in which these are synthesized in individual stories before one can understand the over all quality of Bierce's fiction. For this analysis only the best of Bierce's short-stories have been selected, for to discuss all of them would, in a great many instances, entail considerable repetition. Since those tales concerning soldiers are, for the most part, the best stories that Bierce wrote, they will be discussed first.

Perhaps no story better emphasizes Bierce's technique than does "A Horseman in the Sky". The conflict of a soldier between his reluctance to kill a fellow-being and his recognition of an obvious duty is intensified by a surprise ending, typical of Bierce's style, in which the fellow-being is revealed as the soldier's father. This theme of a son's killing his father through the claims of honor and duty is, of course, not original with Bierce; however, it is a strikingly appropriate theme for a tale of the Civil War. The motif of the story is the emotional conflict in the soldier, Carter Druse. The conflict could have existed without Private Druse's father; the aversion to killing a human being would serve as sufficient

²⁰ Ibid., "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," p. 18.

cause for such a conflict. The surprise ending, however, in which the father appears as the victim, increases the conflict and, thus, the emotional intensity within both Private Druse and the reader.

The theme is realistic enough. That this identical situation occurred, to Bierce's knowledge, is doubtful; however, that differences in sentiment caused families to fight on opposite sides during the Civil War is history. Thus, a realistic facet of war is presented, but in a setting which is romantic, almost poetic. Consider, for instance, the passage in which Private Druse's father falls from the cliff after his horse has been shot and the way in which his fall appears to a Federal officer:

At a distance of a quarter-mile before him, but apparently at a stone's throw, rose from its fringe of pines the gigantic face of rock, towering to so great a height above him [the Federal officer] that it made him giddy to look up to where its edge cut a sharp, rugged line against the sky. It presented a clean, vertical profile against a background of blue sky to a point half the way down, and of distant hills, hardly less blue, thence to the tops of trees at its base. Lifting his eyes to the dizzy altitude of its summit the officer saw an astonishing sight - a man on horseback riding down into the valley through the air!²¹

This, indeed, is a majestic picture to describe the last moments of a father, meeting death from the hands of his son. Bierce does not attempt to moralize concerning Druse's choice. Whether the private was right or wrong in killing his father is for the reader to decide. Nor does Bierce probe Private Druse's conscience to discover what effect the guilt of patricide had upon him. Whether Druse later rued his decision is not

21 Ibid., "A Horseman in the Sky," p. 7.

important; his feeling of obligation to duty mastered him for one fatal^v moment. That was enough. In war there is no time for reflection or regret.

Characteristic of Bierce's episodic style, "A Horseman in the Sky" is composed of four brief divisions, or minor episodes, each of which, though abrupt in transition from the previous one, is essential to the total effect of the major episode. In a sense, Bierce's stories can be compared to jig-saw puzzles. Each unit viewed separately appears incomplete and unrelated to the other units around it. When all the units are placed in their proper order, however, they blend into a compact picture.

Had Bierce written only "Chickamauga", critics would still be justified in making such comments as, "No one has ever produced the horrors of war more vividly than Ambrose Bierce."²² Despite Quinn's belief that tragedy and horror are incompatible within the same story,²³ "Chickamauga" is both horrible and tragic. The tragedy lies in the fact that the horror is seen through the eyes of a small child, a deaf mute, and as such is disproportionate. The boy is not capable of understanding the horror; indeed, he views the massacre and the devastating fire with a certain glee until with an awfulness he realizes that he is looking on his mother and his home. In résumé the theme of the story may sound melodramatic, overdone; however, related in the dispassionate, analytical objectivity of

²² Anonymous, "An English Tribute to the Genius of Ambrose Bierce," Current Opinion, 58:472, June, 1915.

²³ See footnote 4, this chapter.

Bierce's style, the plight of the child becomes desperate, and the tragedy seems to be a tragedy, not only of the small boy, but of an entire world.

For a sheer picture of the horror of the ravages of war, few descriptions can surpass the following account of a mutilated soldier:

The man sank upon his breast, recovered, flung the small boy fiercely to the ground as an unbroken colt might have done, then turned upon him a face that lacked a lower jaw - from the upper teeth to the throat was a great red gap fringed with hanging shreds of flesh and splinters of bone. The unnatural prominence of nose, the absence of chin, the fierce eyes, gave this man the appearance of a great bird of prey crimsoned in throat and breast by the blood of its quarry.²⁴

This man is one of the many mortally wounded soldiers whom the boy regards as normal men who are squirming on their bellies for the sake of a game. This physical horror does not register as such with the boy. Thus, not only have the soldiers been massacred in vain, but also without sympathy or consolation. Their dying agonies are viewed only by a six-year-old mute and by the dense forest, both equally incapable of understanding or testifying to the tragedy.

These uncounted and unmourned deaths alone would seem to be tragedy enough, but this desperateness transcends to a greater tragedy. The boy, having played make-believe over the bodies of the wounded soldiers awhile, is attracted by the flames of a conflagration in the distance. He leaves the soldiers and runs through the forest until he comes to the fire. At first he is delighted with the new and unusual beauty. Then some of the buildings still standing become vaguely familiar to him. The gradual realization be-

²⁴ Bierce, "Chickamauga," op. cit., p. 21.

comes sudden as he finds the mutilated body of his mother. He cannot express his grief fully. As he stands there in the sudden dark of the evening with no company but the dead, made grotesque by the flames, he makes pitiful efforts to wail:

The child moved his little hands, making wild, uncertain gestures. He uttered a series of inarticulate and indescribable sounds - something between the chattering of an ape and the gobbling of a turkey - a startling, unholy sound, the language of a devil. The child was a deaf mute.²⁵

In addition to developing the main points of a story, Bierce makes many keen observations in brief sentences which, though contributing nothing directly to the development of the story, add greatly to the tone of it. Typical of these observations is one in "Chickamauga" which concerns the headless men as seen by the little mute. The small child sees soldiers, apparently without heads, lying on the bank of a stream with their shoulders touching the water. To the boy they are strange men, and he wonders what they have done with their heads. Bierce explains it: "After slaking their thirst these men had not had the strength to back away from the water, nor to keep their heads above it. They were drowned."²⁶ Although Bierce deals no more with these nor with their peculiar circumstances, he creates tragedy. Weary soldiers, in agony from thirst, pull and squirm their way over many mile-long feet in a desperate effort to satisfy their thirst. And as long as that thirst remains, they find energy to go on. However, once satisfying that thirst, their immediate

²⁵ Ibid., p. 23.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 22.

initiative for struggling is gone. The will to live is not great enough to make them strive as was their great thirst. Once again in relative physical comfort, they lose all control of their motor faculties and, one imagines, willingly slip into a stupor and, consequently, into an oblivion in which they know no agony.

This ability to sum^{up} psychological situations and adjustments in a brief sentence is seen all through Bierce's stories. It is part of his epigrammatic style. In "One of the Missing" Bierce emphasizes the apparent indifference of a soldier in peril who has reconciled himself to his imminent dangers. Jerome Searing, a scout of Federal forces, is trying to make his way through the enemy outposts. He is aware of the perilous aspects of his assignment but comments on it only in relation to the time of day. "'It seems a long time,' he thought, 'but I cannot have come very far; I am still alive.'"²⁷ That this matter-of-fact resignation toward an inevitable fate is a true representation of the average, or even the unusual, soldier is doubtful. However, this half humorous comment of Searing is a superb summary of that attitude where it does exist.

The importance of a private life, considered so easily expendable in the strategy of war, receives impersonal comment from Bierce in this story:

As Jerome Searing drew back the hammer of his rifle and with his eyes upon the distant Confederates considered where he could plant his shot with the best hope of making a widow or an orphan or a childless mother - or perhaps all three,...²⁸

²⁷ Ibid., "One of the Missing," p. 31.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 33.

And about that there is no more comment. Bierce neither regrets nor moralizes. He merely recognizes the fact and comments while continuing the story.

Although Bierce was given the sobriquet "Bitter Bierce" and was known for his bitterness in "Prattle" and his journalistic writing, bitterness of any sort, other than the natural irony which may be construed as such, is rarely seen in his short-stories. In "Killed at Resaca", however, he does show an implacable bitterness, and this against a woman. "Killed at Resaca" is the only one of Bierce's war stories in which a woman plays a significant part, and in this story she appears only briefly at the very end. But her brief appearance is enough to portray her as shallow, selfish, unsympathetic, and totally detestable.*

Lieutenant Herman Brayle, handsome, fearless, intrepid beyond caution, was vain in his courage. Never did he take advantage of shelter. Always he fought in the open, as if daring an enemy bullet to strike him. Naturally, such a dare as that does not go long unaccepted, and in one particularly costly battle at Resaca, Georgia, Lieutenant Brayle, who had miraculously escaped in many previous battles, was killed. The lieutenant's personal effects were distributed among his more intimate associates, and to the narrator of the story fell the pocketbook. After the war was over, the narrator looked through the pocketbook and found a letter from a former sweetheart of the dead lieutenant. The cause of his vain courage, of course, is revealed in the letter:

"Mr. Winters, whom I shall always hate for it, has been telling that at some battle in Virginia, where he got his hurt, you were seen crouching behind a tree. I think he wants to injure you in

my regard, which he knows the story would do if I believed it. I could bear to hear of my soldier lover's death, but not of his cowardice."²⁹

The narrator takes the letter directly to Marian Mendenhall, the author ✓ of the letter. She remains somewhat aloof and indifferent until she sees the blood stains on the letter. Her ensuing horror is not from thoughts of her lover, possibly dead, but ^{at} the very sight of blood. She suddenly realizes that Brayle must be dead: "She hastily flung the letter on the blazing coals. 'Uh! I cannot bear the sight of blood!' she said. 'How did he die?'"³⁰ The scorning reply shows the bitterness, the hate which the narrator feels for the woman: "'He was bitten by a snake,' I replied."³¹

Although Bierce may not satisfy the technical demands of psychologists with his depictions of psychological reactions, he succeeds in drawing a convincing picture for lay readers. That the philosophy of accepting ✓ death with calm resignation can be transferred in a brief conversation from one soldier to another may seem a bit improbable; however, in "Parker Adderson, Philosopher" such a transference is suggested. Parker Adderson, a Federal spy, has been apprehended by the Confederate forces and has been brought before a general to give an account of himself. The general is at first surprised, then amused, and later definitely affected by the spy's apparent calm acceptance of the fact that he is to die at sunrise. The execution having been set, the general asks Adderson:

29 Ibid., "Killed at Resaca," p. 45.

30 Loc. cit.

31 loc. cit.

"Have you any arrangements of your own that you wish to make: Do you wish to see a chaplain, for example?"

"I could hardly secure a longer rest for myself by depriving him of some of his."

"Good God, man! Do you mean to go to your death with nothing but jokes upon your lips? Do you know that this is a serious matter?"

"How can I know that? I have never been dead in all my life. I have heard that death is a serious matter, but never from any of those who have experienced it."³²

Bierce sets this story during the most appropriate time of the day to make such a detached attitude toward death possible. There is something about that relatively quiet interlude between daylight and darkness that mollifies the tragedies of the world, and it is at dusk that Adderson tells the general his infectious philosophy of death.

Few of Bierce's stories are without a touch of irony, and in "Parker Adderson, Philosopher" there is more than a touch. At an opportune moment Adderson lunges for the general and a fight ensues. It has grown dark within the tent, and before guards can restore order, the general is mortally wounded. Cognizant of the fact that he is dying, the general is, nevertheless, at peace, "his face suffused with a smile of ineffable sweetness." The philosophy of Adderson has found its true philosopher and has left its imposter, for Adderson, realizing that he is to die immediately, goes nearly mad with fear and pleads inarticulately for mercy, for a stay of execution, however brief.

"Parker Adderson, Philosopher" is one story in which Bierce surpasses realism. Although the incident itself - that of a spy being apprehended

³² Ibid., "Parker Adderson, Philosopher," p. 61.

and shot - is real enough in war, the concomitant conversation between the spy and the general is scarcely conceivable, and certainly not in the way it develops in the story. The rapid, pithy dialogue of Adderson and the general, perhaps the best dialogue in any of Bierce's stories, elevates the characters, and the reader, far from the hastily improvised headquarters of the battlefield. One might expect such a well-phrased conversation between two philosophical grammarians, but not between a general and a spy in the stress of battle.

It has been stated that the realism in Bierce's war stories results from the total and final impressions of horror, fear, goriness, and dread of war rather than from realistic style. That is, the final pictures of horror and fear are real enough although the methods through which the impressions are created are not always realistic. Consequently, it is not surprising that this ultimate realism in Bierce's writing is absent from all of Bierce's short-stories except his war tales. In his other stories the fantastic, or supernatural, which is noticeable, though sublimated, in his war tales, becomes the strongly predominant temper. Thus it is that the stories concerning civilians in the selections in In the Midst of Life are entirely different from those concerning the soldiers. They more closely resemble the tales in Can Such Things Be?; consequently, they will be discussed in conjunction with the similar stories in Can Such Things Be?.

One valid objection to Bierce's short-stories is that the author throughout is obsessed with a limited number of ideas which he expresses in slightly varying forms in many of his stories. It is as if through

repetition Bierce intended to make the unreal appear plausible. Most of his supernatural stories are built around deaths caused by incorporeal agents, and most of the agents inflict death indirectly - through fear, rather than through mysterious, invisible devices peculiar to their own natures.

The stories which convey this idea most impressively are "A Watcher by the Dead", "The Man and the Snake", "A Tough Tussle", "The Middle Toe of the Right Foot", and "The Suitable Surroundings". In "A Watcher by the Dead" three physicians discuss the psychological make-up of man and man's ability to withstand shocks. Dr. Helberson contends that no man is capable of remaining all night by himself in the room with a corpse without being completely unnerved. Dr. Harper, however, claims that he has a friend, Jarette, who, if the wager is attractive enough, can do so. The wager is made; however, no corpse is immediately available. Dr. Mancher volunteers to pose as a corpse, the substitution, of course, being unknown to Jarette. After a few hours of the vigil have passed, a sufficient time for the situation to begin to wear on Jarette, Dr. Mancher cannot resist the temptation to have some fun with the watcher. Jarette, however calm he may have been previously, is so completely unnerved when he detects the corpse stalking behind him that he dies of fright.

Bierce, as if realizing that the situation is not particularly convincing, develops the story enough further to show the effect of the death upon the three physicians. Mancher, fearing that he would be charged with murder, changes clothes with Jarette, whose face has become so distorted with fright that it is unrecognizable, and leaves the country.

The other two doctors, believing that their colleague, whom they thought the dead man to be, had been the victim of strange and inexplicable powers, forsook their practice and turned to gambling. Thus, by stressing the credulity of the two learned physicians in the story, Bierce attempts to make the death-from-fear situation more convincing to the reader. Even with this added stress, however, he does not entirely succeed in making his story credible.

A more convincing treatment of death from fear is found in "The Man and the Snake". To begin with, the theme in this story is more plausible than that of "A Watcher by the Dead". There is infinitely more to fear, at least by an intelligent mind, from the real, impending danger of being confined in a room with a huge snake than there is from the unreal vagaries of the dead. In this case the horror of an actual, conceivable physical experience is greater than the horror of an unimaginable, supernatural one. Secondly, in "The Man and the Snake" Bierce develops his situation more gradually and convincingly. Imagine the original shock Harker Brayton must have felt as he glanced under his bed:

It [his gaze] disclosed, almost directly under the foot-rail of the bed, the coils of a large serpent - the points of light were its eyes! Its horrible head, thrust flatly forth from the innermost coil and resting upon the outermost, was directed straight toward him, the definition of the wide, brutal jaw and the idiot-like forehead serving to show the direction of its malevolent gaze. The eyes were no longer merely luminous points; they looked into his own with a meaning, a malign significance.³³

But Brayton is an intelligent and thoughtful man, excellent in health,

³³ Ibid., "The Man and the Snake," p. 143.

intrepid in action. His first reaction upon seeing the snake is to retreat from the room as quietly as he can. A feeling of cowardice overcomes him, however, as he proceeds to do this and, instead of retreating, he actually advances a step or two toward the serpent, not once withdrawing his eyes from its beady stare. He attempts to draw his eyes away but cannot. Brayton is being charmed by the snake, a phenomenon which he had so lately discredited. After a time undesignated by Bierce, but which seemed interminable to Brayton, the effect of the malignant, glowing eyes becomes noticeable.

They gave off enlarging rings of rich and vivid colors, which at their greatest expansion successively vanished like soap bubbles; they seemed to approach his very face, and anon were an immeasurable distance away. He heard, somewhere, the continuous throbbing of a great drum, with desultory bursts of far music, inconceivably sweet, like the tones of an aeolian harp. He knew it for the sunrise melody of Memnon's statue, and thought he stood in the Nileside reeds hearing with exalted sense that immortal anthem through the silence of the centuries.

The music ceased; rather, it became by insensible degrees the distant roll of a retreating thunder-storm. A landscape, glittering with sun and rain, stretched before him, arched with a vivid rainbow framing in its giant curve a hundred visible cities. In the middle distance a vast serpent, wearing a crown, reared its head out of its voluminous convolutions and looked at him with his dead mother's eyes.³⁴

Brayton becomes so entranced by the eyes of the snake that he loses his balance and tumbles to the floor, bruising his face. His eyes, however, are again drawn to those of the snake, and in spite of his stunned and bruised condition, he pulls himself gradually toward the reptile. A series of agonizing screams interrupts the tranquility of Dr. Druring and

³⁴ Ibid., p. 146.

his wife, at whose home Brayton is staying, and when Druring reaches his guest's room to investigate, Brayton is dead, his mouth frothing, his face distorted. He is lying a few feet from a stuffed snake which lay coiled underneath his bed.

The fear, then, and the charming by the snake ~~were~~ all in Brayton's mind. Brayton actually hypnotized himself and, probably, died from asphyxiation. The fear was generated in Brayton's mind and was just as great as it would have been had the stuffed snake with shoe-button eyes been real. Bierce makes the situation - that of a snake appearing in the bedroom - plausible in the minds of both Brayton and the reader by establishing that Dr. Druring's mansion is also a snakery. This fact, known to Brayton, makes plausible his acceptance of the stuffed snake as real.

In "A Watcher by the Dead" and "The Man and the Snake", fear, gradually intensifying, has been the direct cause of the deaths. In "A Tough Tussle" mounting fear also plays a lethal role, but this time indirectly. The agent of fear in this story is a dead soldier, recognized as such by Lieutenant Byring, who is keeping vigil near by. At first, seeing the dead body in the moving shadows of the moonlight, the lieutenant is not visibly affected. Something about the time and the quiet of the night, however, soon disturbs Byring's calm. The optical illusion created by the moving shadows seems to bring the body nearer the lieutenant. A check, however, reassures Byring that the corpse has not moved, and he realizes that he is becoming nervous. His first impulse is to leave - ; he is not bound to his vigil by duty - but, as in "The Man and the Snake",

he knows that to leave would be cowardly. Consequently, he resolves to watch the dead. His mental equilibrium gradually wavers as he concentrates on the body; his own body is tense to the point of pain, and his imagination convinces him that the body of the dead soldier has moved. Suddenly he snaps and attacks the dead man. Exactly what ensued in the battle is not definite, except that Byring is killed by his own sword. The direct agent of death is one of two things. Either Byring in his chaotic mental state inadvertently stabs himself, or else the spirit of the dead soldier, incensed by the desecration of the body, inflicts the mortal wound. Although the second interpretation adds a supernatural element to the story - and in that respect may be the conclusion at which Bierce wanted the reader to arrive - it does not alter the worth of the story one way or the other.

The merit of the story lies in Bierce's ability to convince the reader that a normally sane and intelligent man, alone in the night in the deep forest, can be so disturbed by the physical presence of death that the hallucinations and illusions which follow can completely upset his mental balance. The success of "A Tough Tussle" lies in the feeling which Bierce creates, without implying in actual words, of a supernatural force existent throughout. That force is particularly necessary here, for death to a soldier is nothing new or mysterious; nor was the deep forest a strange environment for the soldiers of the Civil War. In the forest in which a battle has been recently fought, the presence of the dead body is not in itself enough to create within Byring any feeling of uneasiness. The supernatural force associated with the dead soldier has to be active,

in a magnetic sense, to cause the lieutenant to give the corpse more than a casual glance. If the reader is willing to accept the possibility of a supernatural agent, the story is convincing. That, of course, is a requirement for the success of all supernatural stories. The reader must be in a receptive frame of mind; he must be willing to believe. . .

That this receptive mind, this willingness to believe, is necessary for a story of the supernatural to be convincing and that such a frame of mind can be evoked and can be tremendously influenced by a well-written ghost-story form the motif of "The Suitable Surroundings." Colston, a ghost-story writer of some renown, discovers an acquaintance reading one of his ghost-stories on an early morning trolley. Colston laments that his acquaintance is doing him and his story a great injustice by reading the tale at such an "unghostly" hour. Marsh, the writer's acquaintance, is agreeable to Colston's suggestion that he read the story under specified conditions. Colston specifies:

"In solitude - at night - by the light of a candle. There are certain emotions which a writer can easily enough excite - such as compassion or merriment. I can move you to tears or laughter under almost any circumstances. But for my ghost story to be effective you must be made to feel fear - at least a strong sense of the supernatural - and that is a difficult matter. I have a right to expect that if you read me at all you will give me a chance; that you will make yourself accessible to the emotion that I try to inspire."³⁵

Marsh assures Colston that he will be in solitude by going to a haunted house. He takes a new story, not the one he has read on the trolley. The

35 Ibid., "The Suitable Surroundings," p. 164.

conditions, then, are perfect. Although Bierce does not give the ghostly part of the manuscript, apparently the story is so terrible that Marsh dies of fright.

In "The Suitable Surroundings" Bierce is not convincing. A characteristic of his style which usually adds to his stories in this one detracts from it. In this story his subtleness leaves too much implied, too little told. An account of Marsh's death is not given. His body is merely found on the following day.

Although death comes to the main protagonists in nearly all of Bierce's stories, fear is not always the agent of death. Sometimes the death is mysterious, unexplained. Two stories, "The Death of Halpin Frayser" and "The Baby Tramp," will serve as examples of tales in which death is inexplicable. The theme of a spirit's moving about, with or without its old body, has been used many times. In "The Death of Halpin Frayser," however, Bierce alters the theme somewhat. The corpse of Frayser's mother, unmoved by any spirit, stalks the graveyard in which she was buried, and she has no natural affection for anyone, only hate for all. Many years after her death, Frayser, unaware that his mother is buried there, wanders into the cemetery late at night. Bierce, who usually relies upon his subtle inferences to create his moods, becomes definitely graphic in his account of Frayser's reaction to his surroundings.

As he pressed forward he became conscious that his way was haunted by invisible existences whom he could not definitely figure to his mind. From among the trees on either side he caught broken and incoherent whispers in a strange tongue which yet he partly understood. They seemed to him fragmentary utterances of a monstrous conspiracy against his body and soul.

It was now long after nightfall, yet the interminable forest through which he journeyed was lit with a wan glimmer having no point of diffusion, for in its mysterious lumination nothing cast a shadow. A shallow pool in the guttered depression of an old wheel rut, as from a recent rain, met his eye with a crimson gleam. He stooped and plunged his hand into it. It stained his fingers; it was blood! Blood, he then observed, was about him everywhere. The weeds growing rankly by the roadside showed it in blots and splashes on their big, broad leaves. Patches of dry dust between the wheelways were pitted and spattered with a red rain. Defiling the trunks of the trees were broad maculations of crimson, and blood dripped like dew from their foliage.³⁶

A single effect of mystery and horror is established in these paragraphs - an effect often found in the short-stories of Poe .

The predominance of horror in the tales of both Bierce and Poe, has led several critics to draw a comparison between the two.³⁷ For the most part, there is little to compare between the stories of the two authors. Bierce wrote with a greater economy of words than did Poe, and, consequently, his stories do not have the heavy, spine-chilling overtone of horror that pervades Poe's stories. In "The Death of Halpin Frayser," however, Bierce comes nearer approaching Poe's style than he does in any other story. Instead of relying upon an unusual turn of events or a fantastic surprise ending to arouse the emotions of fear and horror in his reader, a device he usually employs, in this story Bierce establishes the feeling for the uncanny, the supernatural, and fantastic throughout. Whereas in most of his stories he implies the existence of supernatural

³⁶ Ibid., "The Death of Halpin Frayser," pp. 396-7.

³⁷ Arthur M. Miller published an article, "The Influence of Edgar Allan Poe on Ambrose Bierce" in American Literature, 4:130-50 1932, and Carrol D. Hall published "Bierce and the Poe Hoax" in The Book Club of California, 1934.

forces, in "The Death of Halpin Frayser", he comments specifically and at length on their almost asphyxiating presence. The following passage describing a situation which affected Frayser could well have come from one of Poe's stories:

So frightful was the situation - the mysterious light burned with so silent and awful a menace; the noxious plants the trees that by common consent are invested with a melancholy or baleful character, so openly in his sight conspired against his peace; from overhead and all about came so audible and startling whispers and the sighs of creatures so obviously not of earth - that he could endure it no longer, and with a great effort to break some malign spell that bound his faculties to silence and inaction, he shouted with the full strength of his lungs!³⁸

The terror here is vivid, not implied. Out of all this morbid, grotesque account evolves the fact that Halpin Frayser is found on the following morning dead on the grave of his mother, whose spiritless corpse presumably murdered him. She had loved her son in earthly life, but a lich, a zombie, a corpse without a soul, has hate for everyone and hate only.

In "A Baby Tramp" the main protagonist is also found dead on a grave which, unknown to him, at any time, is the grave of his mother. Other than in the central idea, however, there is little similarity in the two stories. The heavy overtone of morbidity does not exist in "A Baby Tramp"; in its place is a feeling of pathos, created by a homeless waif, wandering hungry and cold in the snow. The little child had been thrust out into the world several years before when his mother died, and his life had been precarious and difficult since then. The ghost of Hetty Parlow,

³⁸ Bierce, "The Death of Halpin Frayser," op. cit., p. 397.

the little child's mother, had been seen in the cemetery one night about three years after her death. Other than this statement and an account of some unusual weather phenomena - blue rain and crimson snow - which had occurred in the past, there is nothing descriptive in the story that suggests any supernatural element. The implication of a supernatural element in the end is obvious, of course. The boy is found upon the grave of his mother, whose ghost has been previously seen. "A Baby Tramp," then, is inferior in every respect to "The Death of Halpin Frayser." It attempts to create a supernatural situation without first establishing a feeling for the realm of the unreal.

The supernatural sometimes is replaced by the pseudo-scientific in Bierce's stories. Outstanding examples of this are "The Damned Thing" and "Moxon's Monster." Both of these stories seem to have anticipated the pseudo-scientific trend in modern pulp stories such as are found in Amazing, Fantastic, and magazines of similar quality. "The Damned Thing," perhaps, is Bierce's most widely read short-story, and not without reason. By standards of readability, it is one of his best tales, ranking with "A Horseman in the Sky," "Chickamauga," and "The Death of Halpin Frayser." It does not have the psychological and emotional conflict of "A Horseman in the Sky," the tragic quality of "Chickamauga," or the horror of "The Death of Halpin Frayser"; but it does challenge the reader to deny a theory which if accepted, makes the age of invisible man more than an obsessed scientist's dream.

Consistent in style throughout, Bierce also wrote "The Damned Thing" in episodes. The beginning episode states the present situation - a

mangled body, a coroner and his jury, and the problem of determining the cause of the death. This scene is followed by an episodic flashback in which reporter Harker tells that he saw the victim, his friend, thus mutilated in a field of wild oats by some invisible power - a power which, though invisible, made a permanent path through the oats as it passed. The reporter's strange and unbelievable story is supported in the third episode by the dead man's diary. The hunter, for such the dead man was, had requested the reporter to come to his assistance and to help him determine whether the invisible thing he sensed was external or only in his own mind. In the diary is also an explanation of the invisible, the damned thing, for the hunter had reached an explanation before he had succumbed to its superior power.

"As with sounds, so with colors. At each end of the solar spectrum the chemist can detect the presence of what are known as 'actinic' rays. They represent colors - integral colors in the composition of light - which we are unable to discern. The human eye is an imperfect instrument; its range is but a few octaves of the real 'chromatic scale.' I am not mad; there are colors that we cannot see.

"And, God help me! The Damned Things is of such a color!"³⁹

H. G. Wells' Invisible Man would have had less trouble, perhaps, had he attempted to develop the color at the extreme ends of the real "chromatic scale" instead of erasing all color entirely.

"Moxon's Master", though inferior to "The Damned Thing" as a short-story, is more interesting in view of current scientific research than is the story about the creature at the invisible end of the solar

³⁹ Ibid., "Moxon's Master," p. 527.

spectrum. Moxon's master is a machine, created by Moxon to behave like a human being. The relationship between Moxon and his machine becomes a Frankenstein-Monster affair. They play chess together, and the machine is capable of defeating Moxon, although it cannot win all the time. In tuning the sensitivities of the machine, however, Moxon overlooked one thing - moral understanding. Physically superior to any man, the machine has no values, no understanding of moral responsibilities, no regard for life. Consequently, when Moxon irritates the machine by defeating it at chess, it passively kills him. Only a flash of lightning, destroying the house and the machine, halts the mechanical monster from killing many more. Although there appears to be a moral to the story - that of the danger of intellect without moral values - Bierce doubtless considered that an incidental development if, indeed, he considered that element at all. The point that Bierce wanted to make is that it is possible to make a machine capable of thought.

Bierce's obsession with death detracts from one of his stories which otherwise equals, if not surpasses, Twain's "The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg." "The Famous Gilson Bequest" is very similar to Twain's story of man's corruptibility, the will of a doomed man breaking down completely the morals of an entire community. Milton Gilson, robber of sluice boxes and a man of dubious character in all respects, is arrested for stealing a horse. He is sentenced and quickly hanged. On his body is found a copy of his will, and Henry Brentshaw, who hanged Gilson, is, ironically, made executor of Gilson's estate, thought at first to be small. The will, however, carried some peculiar provisions. Inasmuch as many persons had

charged Gilson with robbing their sluice boxes, the entirety of his estate, minus court expenses, was to go to any person who could provide sufficient evidence of Gilson's guilt. If more than one person provided sufficient proof, the estate was to be divided equally among all successful claimants. If none succeed, however, within a period of five years, the entire estate was to become the legal property of Mr. Brentshaw.

Thus the seed of corruptibility is sown. A more extended search into Gilson's papers reveals a tremendous estate comprised of bonds, real estate, and ready cash. The aspirants for this estate are many, including, of course, Mr. Brentshaw. Consequently, the man who so lately defamed Gilson's character and brought about his execution, is busy eulogizing the horse-thief, attempting to establish that robbing sluice boxes could not have been done by a man with such high standards. Mr. Brentshaw succeeds by hiring the best lawyers and by bribing the best defendants; however, no sooner does he win one case than another aspirant brings up a new claim. Hence, for five years Brentshaw fights the innumerable claims against Gilson and wins them all, but in so doing he spends every dollar in the Gilson estate.

Had Bierce been contented to let his story end with this note, "The Famous Gilson Bequest" would stand out as a satire on man's corruptible nature. Bierce, however, was impelled by his obsession with death and the supernatural to add an anticlimactic and weird ending to an otherwise excellent story. Brentshaw, who has extolled Gilson's virtues extensively in court, has come to believe them himself. He goes to the grave of Gilson and repents of his earlier action which had put Gilson in his grave.

During Brentshaw's retrospective lament, the ghost of Gilson goes about ✓
the graveyard stealing from other graves. Brentshaw sees the ghost, and Bierce implies that Brentshaw dies from shock. Only Bierce's superb, impressionistic style keeps this ending from completely ruining the story. As it is, the story is anticlimactic without being discordant, for Bierce effects a smooth transition from the satiric to the horrific. Consider, for instance, this account of the high water in the cemetery: "Here the retiring flood has stranded a number of open coffins, about and among which it gurgled with low sobbings and stilly whispers."⁴⁰ To anyone who has heard the sounds of retiring backwaters, this passage lives. The "stilly whispers," which defy human analysis, become eerie in Bierce's account because they are whispers of desecration.

Remembered primarily as a journalist whose forte was satire and ✓
secondarily as a writer of short-stories, Bierce has been given too little consideration as a humorist. Those who acknowledge his short-stories commend the war tales, a few of the tales of the supernatural, and, for the most part, ignore those shockingly humorous stories in Negligible Tales and The Parenticide Club. An analysis of Bierce's works, however, would be incomplete without a comment on their humor, superbly satisfying to the lusty demands of Bierce's time. As short-stories these accounts which reduce atrocities to the absurd are inferior, but as humor they surpass all else produced in that era. Unlike the humorists Artemus Ward, Josh Billings, Petroleum V. Nasby, and even Mark Twain, Bierce did

⁴⁰ Ibid., "The Famous Gilson Bequest," p. 127.

not need to rely on misspellings, dialect, illiteracy, or embarrassing situations of the ignorant for his humor. Also, unlike that of his contemporaries, much of Bierce's best humor is subtle. True, Bierce's chief humor is derived from two devices - understatement and exaggeration; however, these devices are generously assisted by subtle inferences, epigrammatic barbs of wit, and whimsical phrasings that need no development of situation to make them humorous.

Readers unaware of the ineffectiveness of law and disregard for life that existed in the California frontier may think that Bierce's exaggeration of these things is unnecessary. Actually, however, enough digression from the principles of moral and social justice exists today to make such stories as "The Widower Turmore", "An Imperfect Conflagration", "The City of the Gone Away", and "My Favorite Murder" still contemporary. Much of the humor of these stories comes from the broad accounts of the corruptibility of law enforcement officers, courts, and public officials in general. In "The Widower Turmore" Joram Turmore "murders" his wife in a fashion no doubt suggested by Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado". Having admittedly married the wealthy Elizabeth Mary Johnin for her money, Turmore plans some out of the ordinary way of murdering her - a method which will make her death match the social distinction of being a Turmore. His plan is to bind her and place her in one corner of a strong room in his home and then to enclose the corner with mortared bricks, thus making her an air tight tomb. Turmore, having carried out his plans to this extent, tells of his next day's activities:

After a night's rest I went to the Judge of the Court of Successions and Inheritances and made a true and sworn relation of all that I had done - except that I ascribed to a servant the manual labor of building the wall. His honor appointed a court commissioner, who made a careful examination of the work, and upon his report Elizabeth Mary Turmore was, at the end of the week, formally pronounced dead. By due process of law I was put into possession of her estate, and although this was not by hundreds of thousands of dollars as valuable as my lost treasures, it raised me from poverty to affluence and brought me the respect of the great and good.⁴¹ ✓

Unfortunately, Turmore's designs are thwarted. His wife escapes through an opening, created by the removal of two stones which she had previously loosened. Then the inefficiency of the law and order is again brought into view:

I have endeavored to procure a warrant, but the Lord High Baron of the Court of Indictment and Conviction reminds me that she is legally dead, and says my only course is to go before the Master in Dadavery and move for a writ of disinterment and constructive revival. So it looks as if I must suffer without redress this great wrong at the hands of a woman devoid alike of principles and shame.⁴²

As has been stated previously, Bierce was obsessed with death, and his humorous stories are as full of death as are his tales of horror. In "The City of the Gone Away" wholesale homicide is not only condoned, but is also encouraged by people from far and near. Having learned at the age of twenty-three of "the possibilities of happiness latent in another person's coin", the narrator left his native heath and traveled to a city by the sea, where he set up a modest business as a doctor, albeit he had not training or education whatsoever in that field. As a result,

⁴¹ Ibid., "The Widower Turmore," p. 745.

⁴² Ibid., p. 747.

he soon learned that a floral shop and an undertaking parlor were convenient branches to his business. His reputation for so completely curing his patients of their earthly ailments spread rapidly and his practice continually expanded.

So great grew the renown of my skill in medicine that patients were brought to me from all the four quarters of the globe. Burdensome invalids whose tardiness in dying was a perpetual grief to their friends; wealthy testators whose legatees were desirous to come by their own; superfluous children of penitent parents and dependent parents of frugal children; wives of husbands ambitious to remarry and husbands of wives without standing in the courts of divorce - these and all conceivable classes of the surplus population were conducted to my dispensary in the City of the Gone Away.

Government agents brought me caravans of orphans, paupers, lunatics and all who had become a public charge. My skill in curing orphanism and pauperism was particularly acknowledged by a grateful parliament.⁴³

Included in his business was a large tract of land which he converted into a cemetery. The growth of the city due to his business became so great, however, that the cemetery was condemned as injurious to public health. The bodies were to be removed and the cemetery made into a park. This proposed disinterment of bodies exhumed something other than decomposed cadavers, however. The narrator had not buried his patients but had sold them to medical students, made fertilizer out of them, and had perfected an excellent soap, Toilet Homoline, for which he had received much praise.

Bierce worked understatement and exaggeration together to effect humor by contrast. Thus, a heinous deed, usually murder, is received by

⁴³ Ibid., "The City of the Gone Away," p. 749.

the public with either apathy or mild reproach. In "Oil of Dog" the narrator's parents became so obsessed with their business - that of rendering oil from dogs and unwelcome babies - that they extended their source of raw material to include full-grown children and adult neighbors - whomsoever they could lure into their oilery.

So enterprising had they now become that a public meeting was held and resolutions passed severely censuring them. It was intimated by the chairman that any further raids upon the population would be met in a spirit of hostility.⁴⁴

Thus is the exaggeration of their deeds contrasted with the mildness of their censure.

Perhaps the greatest exaggeration of atrocity is seen in "My Favorite Murder". Not only does the murder excel in the degree of atrocity, but it is unequaled in "artistic" imagination and individualism. Accosting his uncle from the rear, the narrator clubbed him with the butt of a rifle, severed his Achilles tendons with a knife, and folded him into a wheat sack, which he suspended by a rope from a branch of a tree. Starting the human pendulum oscillating, he attracted the attention of his uncle's ram, known throughout the country as an animal of unusual ferocity, capable of battering down stone walls. The climax of the fiendish murder came with the ram ascending some forty or fifty feet into the air before making his downward plunge.

'At the height of forty or fifty feet, as fond recollection presents it to view, it attained its zenith and appeared to remain an instant stationary; then, tilting suddenly forward without

⁴⁴ Ibid., "Oil of Dog," p. 802.

altering the relative position of its parts, it shot downward on a steeper and steeper course with augmenting velocity, passed immediately above me with a noise like the rush of a cannon shot and struck my poor uncle squarely on top of the head! So frightful was the impact that not only the man's neck was broken, but the rope too; and the body of the deceased, forced against the earth, was crushed to pulp beneath the awful front of that meteoric sheep.⁴⁵

The narrator was acquitted of this crime because the punishment for that offense was hanging, and the judge of the trial held stock in an insurance company, with which the narrator held a policy, that insured against hanging.

Considering the predominant conviction among critics that Bierce was a misanthropist, it may be supposed that Bierce's humor generated not from a forgiving understanding of human foibles, but from a vicious bitterness toward them. Although in his tales of horror and of war Bierce appears to have given himself complete freedom of expression, suppressing no emotions whatsoever, in his humorous tales he expressed his morbidity to an even greater extent. By making his stories humorous, he was less likely to incur criticism that his exaggerated atrocities were offensive. Fadiman, in his introduction to Bierce's Collected Writings, suggests that this extreme misanthropy in Bierce inspired his humorous stories. Either to confute or to prove Fadiman's theory is impossible, insufficient evidence existing to support either contention. Although Bierce's journalistic writing was acerb enough to gain him the sobriquet "Bitter Bierce", Walker's theory offers strong argument that

⁴⁵ Ibid., "My Favorite Murder," pp. 799-800.

Bierce's bitterness was professionally acquired, not innately engendered.⁴⁶ The inspiration for Bierce's humor, however, interesting though it may be in a study of Bierce's life, is not as significant in an analysis of his tales as are the facts that he did write nearly twenty short-stories in the humorous vein and that these tales, though inferior as short-stories, represent the best in American humor during the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Before leaving the analysis of Bierce's short-stories, an obvious omission of a work, generally accredited to Bierce, must be explained. An excellent story, "The Monk and the Hangman's Daughter", has been omitted from this discussion because it is not a true work of Bierce. Of novella length, containing nearly 30,000 words, the mystery is Bierce's only in style and in the surprise ending. Dr. G. A. Danziger, referred to previously as Adolphe de Castro, translated the story, apparently written by Herr Richard Voss, from its original German.⁴⁷ His English at that time being imperfect, he took the translation to Bierce for "polishing". Bierce, however, claimed that he was given authority by Danziger to amplify the story in any way he so desired and that he amplified it considerably. Danziger's name, however, preceded Bierce's in the first publication of the story, implying that Danziger was the major contributor to the story. The name order is reversed in present editions of the story. The story, consequently, although it does reflect Bierce's

⁴⁶ See Chapter I, footnote 26.

⁴⁷ Bierce, preface to "The Monk and the Hangman's Daughter," op. cit., p. 662.

style, does not fall within the analysis of Bierce's short-stories. This omission does not discredit Bierce's contribution toward "The Monk and the Hangman's Daughter." It merely recognizes the fact that the story is not purely Biercean. Bierce's reputation as a short-story writer, however, does not have to rest upon this particular work. His own creative ability in many incidents surpasses that of Herr Voss, and his style is always distinctly his.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

Although many things in Bierce's life - his personality, his cynicism, the method of his disappearance - are, and probably always will be, controversial, one definite and important conclusion can be made: Bierce deserves to be ranked among the best short-story writers in America's brief literary history. Enjoying in his own time considerable journalistic fame, he has remained since in relative literary obscurity. The creative effort and the many hours devoted to "Prattle" could doubtless have produced many short-stories of more durable quality than were his journalistic columns. And had the thousands of words in "Prattle" been channelled into short-stories, Bierce, like O. Henry, could have demanded a prominent niche in the development of the short-story in America through sheer bulk alone. The journalistic writing offered more immediate monetary reward, however, and Bierce was able to devote very little time to writing short-stories. The quantity, however, is not essential in Bierce's case, nor should it be in any, for the quality of his best stories will compare well with any standards.

If, considering Clark's essentials of a short-story,¹ one looks for action, concentration, cause and effect, human interest, and conflict in Bierce's tales, he certainly will not be disappointed. Although there is a minimum of physical activity in the stories, the mental activity, concomitant with the psychological conflict, is intense; and the chain of

¹ Glenn Clark, A Manual of Short Story Art (New York: MacMillan Company, 1922), pp. 40-2.

cause and effect, which often leads from normality to abnormality, is especially well developed. The observation has been made several times previously that one of the strong points in Bierce's style is his concentration of detail and events. There is no disintegrated rambling in any of Bierce's stories. The criticism may be made that his tales are not widely and immediately interesting; however, for those who are intellectually capable of understanding them, the interest is there.

According to Albright, "The short-story that lays claim to rank as literature must have a real reason for existence. It must have a point."² And the motive must be an incident motive, moral motive, or an impressionistic motive. Bierce's stories easily meet this requirement. The motive behind all of them is impressionistic. Bierce's writing is esthetic, not moralistic. It is instructive only inasmuch as the impressions instil within the reader a new understanding or appreciation. Thus his stories can be reread with more profit than can the stories of many others, for the senses, to which Bierce appeals, cannot be stimulated by memory, but must thrill from repeated experiences.

The mechanism of Bierce's stories is so perfect that unfavorable critics have had to search elsewhere for their criticism. Influenced too much, perhaps, by his vituperative journalism, critics such as Noel and Grattan have seen bitterness in Bierce's stories, also. Although there is a great deal of natural irony and relentless description in the tales, there is not enough bitterness throughout to be significant. Per-

² Evelyn May Albright, The Short Story (New York: MacMillan Company, 1928), p. 28.

haps the critics felt that the unrelenting details of horror were inspired by bitterness, but that such is the source of the horror is unlikely. In the first place, the horror lacks the emotion or passion necessary in bitterness. Throughout his war stories Bierce remains cold and aloof from personal feelings, from moralizing, or from condemnation. As a matter of fact, his dispassionate objectivity is carried to such an extent that, although Bierce fought for the North, his stories indicate no partiality toward either side. To have been partial - or to have been bitter - would have made his realistic impressions less authentic.

Fadiman, another critic, charges that Bierce wrote of the supernatural and exaggerated the natural because he could not endure it. "He was so obsessed by the horror of real life that he had to call in the aid of another dimension to express it."³ If one considers Bierce's own feeling concerning writing, Fadiman's charge becomes unlikely. Bierce thought that truth could best be shown in fiction, through exaggeration.⁴ Thus through his exaggeration of horror he stressed certain truths. Bierce surely did not believe in the least that man could die from fright alone, as in the case of Jerome Searing or of Harker Brayton; but by the depiction of this intense fear he impresses upon the reader that an intense emotional disturbance can have a lasting effect on a person. Bierce also felt that

³ Ambrose Bierce, Collected Writings. (New York: Citadel Press, 1946), Clifton Fadiman, introduction, p. xvii.

⁴ Walter Neale, Life of Ambrose Bierce (New York: Walter Neale, Publisher, 1929), p. 371.

narrative fiction, intended as fiction, should not be based upon actual occurrences; for fact interferes with imagination, and imagination surpasses fact.⁵ Consequently, even in his war stories, which surely could have been drawn from his vast experiences, Bierce went beyond the point of probability to create his realistic impression. True, in some of his stories, such as "A Horseman in the Sky", "A Son of the Gods", and "A Story of a Conscience", he did draw the incidental development from war experiences;⁶ however, the conflict - whether physical or psychological - which climaxes these stories goes far beyond the actual incident experienced by Bierce, yet continues in the same direction. Thus, through his exaggeration, Bierce achieves authenticity of impression, if not of fact, an element for which he strove.

This desire for authenticity prohibited Bierce from writing about love. He felt that carnal love was an unfit topic for the printed page, and he doubted that a more exalted love than carnal existed.⁷ Consequently, of his sixty-eight stories the love element appears in only three, and in these tales it is only incidental to the main theme.⁸ Love is conspicuously absent from Bierce's stories; in none of them is there a love scene. It is to his credit, then, that, feeling as he did concerning love, he did not utilize his stories to discredit it.

⁵ Ibid., p. 372.

⁶ Carey McWilliams, Ambrose Bierce (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1929), pp. 32-45.

⁷ Neale, op. cit., p. 369.

⁸ These stories are "Killed at Resaca," "A Lady from Redhorse," and "An Adventure at Brownville."

Thus it is seen that Bierce not only wrote technically excellent short-stories, but also that his motive was sincere, authentic, and that he accomplished that which he set out to do. If an author can measure up to the aforementioned requirements of a good short-story and at the same time express his sincere convictions, he is a good short-story writer. Bierce accomplished all this; through his style, however, he surpassed the classification good. His style advances him to the rank of the best; for even in his minor pieces, his tales of inferior quality, Bierce's style is still brilliant and direct, his prose still excellent. And last of all, much of that which he wrote is permanent. Whereas his journalistic writing, for the most part, concerned only the peculiar conditions of his time, the San Francisco frontier, much of the writing in his short-stories - the understanding of psychological conflict - is as pertinent and real today, if not more so, than it was when Bierce wrote the tales.

In conclusion, of course, no amount of analysis or criticism can substitute for the actual reading of Bierce's stories. Full appreciation for them must come from thorough knowledge of them. It is hoped, then, that knowledge will bring an increasingly greater number of readers a sound appreciation of the stories and that it will hasten the resurrection to which Follett referred when he wrote: "The works, which have an intrinsic quality suggesting indestructibleness, still await their resurrection to immortality."⁹

⁹ Wilson Follett, "Ambrose, Son of Marcus Aurelius," The Atlantic 160:34, July, 1937.

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