HORROR IN THE FICTION OF AMBROSE BIERCE

APPROVED:

Howard C. Kay
Major Professor

E. S. Clifton
Minor Professor

E. S. Clifton
Director of the Department of English

Robert B. Toulouse
Dean of the Graduate School

HORROR IN THE FICTION OF AMBROSE BIERCE

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By

Philip Allen Tapley, B. A.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The standard edition of Ambrose Bierce's writings is the twelve-volume Collected Works (1909-12), edited by Bierce himself. The Works include his better essays and verse, his dictionary of ironic definitions, material gleaned from newspaper columns and feature stories he had written, and his work in fiction--the fable, the romance, and the short story.

Some of Bierce's satirical non-fiction is worth study and perhaps preservation, but his fiction, particularly his short stories, has always been recognized as his most notable and enduring achievement. Much of it was printed in single volumes before being included in the Collected Works. For example, Fantastic Fables first appeared in 1899 and is bound in the same volume of the Works with The Monk and the Hangman's Daughter (1892), a medieval romance which Bierce translated from German in collaboration with Adolphe Danziger. The short stories are divided into four groups in the Works: Tales of Soldiers and Civilians or In the Midst of Life, first printed in 1891; Can Such Things Be?, originally produced in 1893; and The Parenticide Club, The Ways of Ghosts, Soldier Folks, Some Haunted

Houses, Mysterious Disappearances, and Negligible Tales, brought together for the first time in the Works in 1910.

Aside from two hundred very short and somewhat inconsequential fables, eighty of Bierce's eighty-six short stories involve horror as a major element. The term horror used in this study means specifically the emotion of awe, dread, or abhorrence produced in the reader. It also includes shock and surprise as corollary concomitants.

Since horror is so prevalent in Bierce's fiction and since no concentrated study of this important element has been attempted by critics, it is proposed here to examine carefully the sources and nature of the horror in Bierce's fiction in an attempt to arrive at a better understanding of his literary technique and his contribution to American literature.

The following matters will be considered: the events of Bierce's life which might have predisposed him toward an interest in horror; social or environmental influences which may have led to his interest in horror stories; specific literary influences, Bierce's theories about fiction, and his purposes in writing horror stories; and an examination of the method of creation and the effect of horror in some of his best-known and most representative

stories. The conclusion will consider Bierce's contributions to the technique and subject matter of the American short story.

CHAPTER II

BIERCE'S PERSONAL EXPERIENCE AS A SOURCE OF HORROR

Bierce's childhood was not an ideal one, although it was not marked by any particularly violent events. Born in Meigs County, Ohio, the youngest of ten children, Bierce grew up on a poor, rocky farm in a stern, religious atmosphere. As devout Congregationalists, his family faithfully observed the church ordinances. His parents received affection from all their children except Ambrose, who was an uncommonly disobedient boy. He was often severely thrashed by his father, and his mother's dominating nature and lack of understanding further embittered him. He showed little affection toward any of his brothers and sisters except Albert.[1]

The heavy emphasis on religion and virtue in his family seemed to make Bierce hate anything connected with religion or ethical teaching the rest of his life; he became an agnostic at the age of twenty-five.[2] His unhappy childhood was further marked by a serious

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[1]Paul Fatout, Ambrose Bierce: The Devil's Lexicographer (Norman, Oklahoma, 1951), pp. 9-18.

[2]Carey McWilliams, Ambrose Bierce: A Biography (New York, 1929), p. 81.

asthmatic condition inherited from his mother. He was also troubled with fantasies or apparitions of the horrible and supernatural in his dreams. One dream in particular recurred many times and haunted his memory well into manhood.[3] The dream had the following setting:

> It was night; he [Bierce] was traveling in darkness through a fire-swept region. Pools of water occupied shallow depressions, as if the fire had been followed by rain. Dark clouds passed and revealed stars glittering in the sky. A crimson light burned in the West. . . . As he approached this light, battlements loomed up on the horizon. Within this monstrous building, he finally came to a large room where the same phantasmagorical light was gleaming. He sensed eternity in this light. . . .
>
> Upon a bed in the room a figure lay. He gazed down into its staring eyes and found that the eyes and features were his own![4]

As this description of his dream shows, signs of Bierce's vivid imagination and interest in the unusual and violent had already appeared when he was very young. Possibly such a macabre interest was motivated by feelings of insecurity and rejection.[5]

Bierce's early schooling, though rudimentary, was supplemented by the few books in his father's small library. These consisted of some collected poems by the romantic poets, Gothic novels, a book of Dryden's poems, Pope's translation of the Iliad, religious literature, and possibly stories of Poe that appeared as gift books and

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[3] Ibid., pp. 23-24.

[4] Ibid., p. 24.

[5] Fatout, p. 23.

annuals. Bierce and his brother Albert gave to the school library George Walker's romance. The Three Spaniards, a three volume mystery resembling the books of Ann Radcliffe.[6]

One book that made a deep impression on Bierce as a boy was The Old Red Sandstone, published in Scotland by Hugh Miller. The book began with salutary "advice to young working men desirous of bettering their circumstances," and continued:

> Do not seek happiness in what is misnamed pleasure; seek it rather in what is termed study. Keep your conscience clear, your curiosity fresh, and embrace every opportunity of cultivating your minds. . . . Read good books, not forgetting the best of all. . . .[7]

This advice sank deeply into Bierce's mind; forty years afterward he said: "I can bear testimony to the sanity of this advice, for it was by following it that I pulled myself out of the life of obscurity, privation, and labor in the fields to which I was born."[8]

Bierce violently disliked the unrewarding drudgery of the farm. He got prospect of reprieve from this life when

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[6]Ibid., pp. 9, 25.

[7]Hugh Miller, The Old Red Sandstone, 3rd ed. (Edinburgh, Scotland, 1847), no page given, cited in Fatout, p. 25.

[8]Ambrose Bierce, The San Francisco Examiner (March 18, 1894), cited in Fatout, p. 25.

his uncle, Lucius Bierce, sent him to Kentucky Military Institute in 1859 to prepare for a military career.[9]

At the beginning of the Civil War, Bierce of course chose to escape immediately from the hated farm. In spite of his military training which would have entitled him to officership, he enlisted as a private in the Union forces on April 19, 1861. He entered, a romantic idealistic boy; he emerged four years later, a cynical, emotionally mature man who had seen, felt, and been deeply affected by the horror and violence of war. Some of his war experiences were later incorporated into his short stories.[10]

Bierce's first memorable battle occurred at Philippi, West Virginia. Here the Ninth Infantry, of which he was a member, charged into the town, with the intention of surrounding the enemy. In actual fact, the Ninth fell into a trap, and a battery of Federal guns posted on a hill later began to shell the town and its own men. This shocking tactical blunder Bierce used later in a dramatic story, "One Kind of Officer."[11]

Another incident of horror took place in the mountains of West Virginia in 1862. Bierce's regiment returned to camp one day from an expedition to find that the faces of their dead comrades had been eaten away by

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[9]McWilliams, p. 25.

[10]Ibid., p. 30.

[11]Ibid., p. 32.

the swine of the mountains. A similar event occurs in Bierce's story "Coup de Grace."[12]

In the spring of 1862 even more savage and brutal violence was to sear horror forever on his mind and soul. The battle of Shiloh, one of the bloodiest of the Civil War, confirmed his belief that no benign force ruled the world and kindly directed men's ways. Rather he came to believe that fate was dark and malevolent.[13] Twenty-seven years later Bierce remembered this blood bath as he wrote: "I believe that in the word 'chance' we have the human name of a malign and soulless intelligence bestirring itself in earthly affairs with the brute unrest of Enceladus underneath his mountain."[14] Shiloh affected Bierce, according to his biographers, more profoundly than any other Civil War battle. Fadiman states that the horrors of Shiloh were "directly responsible for some of his most finely felt, least posed stories."[15]

Commissioned second lieutenant in the autumn of 1862, Bierce soon took part in the battle of Stone River, or

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[12] Ibid., p. 36.

[13] Ibid., p. 38.

[14] Bierce, The San Francisco Examiner (August 31, 1889), cited in McWilliams, p. 38.

[15] Walter Neale, Life of Ambrose Bierce (New York, 1929), p. 69; McWilliams, p. 41; Fatout, pp. 43-44; Clifton Fadiman, "Portrait of a Misanthrope," Saturday Review of Literature, XXIX (October 12, 1946), 11.

Murfreesboro, which, like Shiloh, was a holocaust of slaughter. Two thousand men were killed in less than thirty minutes. Bierce revisited the scene of this battle one night when he was an old man. In the dim silence he made out the inscription on an elaborate monument in the center of the field: "Hazen's Brigade, To the Memory of Its Soldiers Who Fell at Stone River, December 31, 1862." Bierce wrote that this was like reading the inscription on his tomb. As he stood on the ridge, the memory of the battle became so real to him that he could actually hear the boom of the cannons and the marching of feet. He later used this memory as a basis for the plot of "A Resumed Identity."[16]

The shock of seeing his comrades killed beside him was always horrible to Bierce. In a battle near Resaca, Georgia, his gallant friend Herman Brayle met death at the head of his division as did the protagonist of "Killed at Resaca." Bierce himself did not remain long unscathed; in the battle of Kennesaw Mountain, he was dangerously wounded by a bullet which grazed his scalp near the temple.[17] According to his brother Albert, this wound

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[16] Ibid., p. 46.

[17] Ibid., p. 55.

changed Bierce's character, strangely making him suspicious of all his friends.[18]

After a month's confinement in the hospital, Bierce is supposed to have visited a girl named Fatima, who rejected his love, thus increasing his bitterness and despondency. Shortly after this disappointment he made one last trip to see his family on their farm in Indiana; after that he never saw any of them again except his favorite brother, Albert.[19]

In October, 1864, he rejoined the army. Then after a few weeks he became bored with the tedium of camp life and crossed forbidden lines for a look at the enemy. He was captured, but managed to make a dangerous escape. In November he took part in the last great battle of his career at Franklin, Tennessee, another bloody engagement.[20] In the midst of the horrors of the battle, Bierce was able to find a kind of grim humor; he noted that six Southern officers lay dead within a few feet of each

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[18] C. Hartley Grattan, Bitter Bierce (New York, 1929), p. 17.

[19] McWilliams, p. 56.

[20] Ibid., p. 58.

other. "It was a great day for Confederates in the line of promotion,"[21] he wrote years later.

Bierce was discharged from the army in January, 1865. In March he received an honorary rank of major from President Andrew Johnson for distinguished service. His military career had ended, but its influence remained with him the rest of his life: The strange elation of preparing for battle was perhaps something he remembered not unpleasantly, but the actual gruesome details of the death and destruction had deeply agonized his sensitive nature.[22] A certain ambivalence seems to have developed in his attitude toward war in which he came to associate horror with beauty, as suggested by Carey McWilliams:

> The thrilling exultation of a far-flung battle with the sweet assembly call running like music down the ranks of blue was always shattered by the unforgettable image of the burning bodies of Shiloh. This vision came to be fixed in his imagination, and he wrote of beauty and horror as one.[23]

Like Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, and F. Scott Fitzgerald who took part in World War I and witnessed a

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[21]Ambrose Bierce, "What Occurred at Franklin," Collected Works of Ambrose Bierce (New York, 1909-12), X, 326-327. Hereafter footnote references to the Collected Works will contain the name Bierce, the title of the selection being cited, the word Works, volume number, and exact page numbers for specific reference.

[22]McWilliams, p. 60.

[23]Ibid., p. 61.

similar collapse of idealism afterward, Bierce became even further disgusted with the corruption and meaninglessness of life following the Civil War. In 1865, when a Reconstruction government was formed to provide order in the South, Bierce was sent to Coosa County, Alabama, as an official of the Treasury Department. While there, he lived and worked in the town of Selma, which had been pillaged and burned by General Wilson's cavalry in the last days of the war. Shocked by the graft and cruelty of the Reconstruction officials, he later wrote "An Inhabitant of Carcosa," a grim fictionalized memoir of his unhappy experiences in Coosa County.[24]

An expedition through the Black Hills and across the western United States into California provided Bierce, as it did so many others, with the means of escaping some of the ugliness of the Reconstruction period. Nevertheless, on this western trip Bierce had the opportunity to observe the hardship of frontier life and the horrors and brutality of Indian warfare. He saw terror-stricken frontiersmen throng the gates of forts to escape warring bands of Indians. He once told his friend Adolphe de Castro that the lure of this warfare almost caused him

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[24] Ibid., pp. 65-67.

to join General Custer in Wyoming;[25] he thus testifies to an almost ingrained as well as a cultivated taste for violence and horror.

Arriving in San Francisco in 1866, Bierce was fascinated with the tumultuous life of the city. When he had been there only a few days he witnessed the hanging of a man in the streets. He observed that quick, terrible death awaited the gold miners on the dark streets of the city as well as in the rugged mountains to the east. Such a dangerous, uncertain way of life appealed to him as a writer; it furnished new material for his vivid imagination and gave an added but gruesome zest to his contemplation of life in the West.[26]

Bierce settled in San Francisco, where he became famous for his newspaper reports and comments on the violent, pathetic, and often scandalous events of the city. In 1871 he married a rich, attractive socialite, Mary Ellen Day. They had three children: two sons, Day and Leigh, and a daughter, Helen. Although the marriage was never happy, its eventual termination was one of the first of several personal tragedies in Bierce's life.[27]

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[25]Adolphe de Castro, Portrait of Ambrose Bierce (New York, 1929), p. 15.

[26]Ibid.

[27]McWilliams, p. 92.

The prelude to the ending of Bierce's marriage was the financial collapse in 1885 of The Wasp, a newspaper which he had edited since 1881. Bierce became disheartened at this time, and his bitterness sharpened as a result of his failure.[28]

In 1889 Bierce's oldest son, Day, was shot to death in a drunken brawl over a woman in a San Francisco saloon. Soon after Day's funeral, Bierce and his wife decided to separate permanently. The twin blows staggered Bierce, and promptly his old asthmatic condition returned.[29]

After these unhappy events, Bierce's satirical pieces became sharper and more caustic than ever. His interest in horror and violence seemed to quicken, and frequently he lapsed into long recollections of the excitement and gruesomeness of his war experiences. In 1891 he published Tales of Soldiers and Civilians. He had written many of these stories in the period immediately following his two major personal disasters. In 1893 he published his second volume of horror stories. Thus, as if goaded by personal disaster, he reached the height of his career in the middle 1890's.[30]

Bierce moved to Washington in the late 1890's to cover Washington politics for the Hearst newspaper chain.

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[28] Ibid., p. 190.

[29] Ibid., p. 194.

[30] Fatout, p. 194.

The change of climate affected his health adversely. As he gasped for breath in nightly trysts with asthma, he was frequently visited by nightmarish memories of battle, suffering, and death. One of his most comforting consolations during this trying period was the companionship of his second son, Leigh, who was always his favorite child. Bierce encouraged his son's plans to be a writer and looked forward to the time when the boy would publish a volume of stories.[31]

In 1901 Bierce let a foolish misunderstanding separate him from Leigh. The boy married against the wishes of his father, who sadly severed all connection with him. Presently, however, Bierce learned that his son was dangerously ill with pneumonia in New York, and rushed from Washington to be with him. Leigh asked his father to send for his sister, Helen, who lived in Los Angeles. While Helen was en route, Leigh died. Bierce's grief was almost unbearable. When Day had died in 1889, there had been the companionship of Leigh to sustain his spirit. With Leigh's death he had no one left, for Helen returned to California.[32]

From 1901 to 1913, the year he died, Bierce was a lonely, ill old man. The death of Leigh, an advanced

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[31]McWilliams, pp. 267-268.

[32]Ibid., pp. 268-269.

asthmatic condition, and what seemed to him the senseless folly and cruelty of human affairs all made him want to die. Grief had crippled and benumbed his spirit. He tried to overcome his loneliness and preoccupation with death by doing exciting things and associating with interesting people, and during the early part of this period he even wrote a few horror stories which were included in his Collected Works.[33]

Bierce left Washington in the spring of 1913 for a last visit to the battlegrounds and cemeteries of the Old South. From there he went to Mexico, where he supposedly joined the army of Pancho Villa to fight Carranza.[34] Years before in "What I Saw of Shiloh" Bierce had written:

> Ah, Youth, there is no such wizard as thou! Give me but one touch of thine artist hand upon the dull canvas of the Present; gild for but one moment the drear and somber scenes of to-day, and I will willingly surrender an other life than the one I should have thrown away at Shiloh.[35]

Perhaps in making a final inspection of old battle scenes--Shiloh, Franklin, Stone River--Bierce was preparing to go into the most important battle of his life, a battle that would accomplish what he thought Shiloh should have done. He then mysteriously disappeared into "the

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[33] Ibid., p. 288.

[34] Ibid., p. 318.

[35] Bierce, "What I Saw of Shiloh," Works, X, 269.

good, good darkness,"[36] as Clifton Fadiman relates in the following passage:

> And at last . . . Ambrose Bierce, old, . . . weary, his creative power only an acrid memory, a bitter jester who had outlived his time, made his queer escape from the civilization he had for forty years derided, and somewhere, presumably in Mexico, encountered his favorite character, the figure who dominates his finest stories: Death.[37]

It would be wrong to insist that Bierce wrote his horror stories solely from a personal conscious or subconscious experience with violence, horror, and shock. Yet even the most summary review of his life shows that he had more than his share of this kind of experience in a time when it was perhaps more a part of life than it is today. Indeed the nature of Bierce's personal life is such to account readily for the predominance of horror in his fiction.

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[36] In Ambrose Bierce: A Biography, Carey McWilliams entitled his chapter on Bierce's death, "The Good, Good Darkness," a fitting title in view of the fact that Bierce believed in nothing but perpetual rest in darkness after death. Not believing in immortality, Bierce often questioned why man would want another life after having lived one life miserably and unhappily. He elaborated his views on death and immortality in an essay, "Immortality," in his Works, XI, 246-252.

[37] Fadiman, p. 12.

CHAPTER III

SOCIAL OR ENVIRONMENTAL INFLUENCES: JOURNALISM AND SCIENCE

Journalism

Bierce began his newspaper career in San Francisco at a time when sensationalism and yellow journalism attracted many readers. According to Frank Luther Mott, the term sensationalism refers to subject matter and treatment which excite the emotions of the reader, for example, detailed stories of crimes, disasters, monstrosities, and sex scandals. Hoaxes, stunts, and crusades were common in sensational journalism, and exploitation of crime and scandal was often allied with the crusading spirit. Yellow journalism, made famous by Hearst's papers in the 1880's, was founded upon the familiar aspects of sensationalism, crime news, scandal, sex, and gossip, but it added to these elements certain characteristic treatment.[1] The distinguishing techniques of yellow journalism were the following:

> (1) scare-heads, in which excessively large type, printed in either black or red, screamed excitement, often about comparatively unimportant news, thus

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[1]Frank Luther Mott, American Journalism (New York, 1941), pp. 442, 539.

> giving a shrill falsity to the entire make-up; (2) the lavish use of pictures, many of them without significance, inviting the abuses of picture-stealing and "faked" pictures; (3) impostures and frauds of various kinds, such as "faked" interviews and stories, misleading headlines, pseudo-science, and parade of false learning; (4) the Sunday supplement, with colored comics and superficial articles; and (5) more or less ostentatious sympathy with the "underdog," with campaigns against abuses suffered by the common people.[2]

One of the most sensational San Francisco newspapers was the News-Letter, whose staff Bierce joined in 1868 as a reporter. He had interested the editor in his writing a year earlier when he began to submit satiric pieces and verse for publication. He was so capable that in December, 1868, he became editor of the paper.[3]

In the last decades of the nineteenth century Bierce and other journalists found ample material for news stories in the rather wild, chaotic affairs of San Francisco. Proud of a short but sensational past of gold rushes, Vigilance committees, annihilating fires, unexplained deaths, and general horror and delirium, the city was a cosmopolitan blend of sophistication and frontier violence and simplicity. Citizens drove fancy rigs to the Cliff House, delighted in extravagant living, shot and knifed each other, attended opera and several theaters,

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[2] Ibid., pp. 539-540.

[3] Fatout, p. 73.

formed Anti-Coolie clubs to pommel unwanted Chinese, read five or six newspapers, and flocked to lectures on spiritualism, hypnotism, or religion.[4]

San Franciscans soon began to adopt a more critical attitude toward the uncurbed violence and turbulence of their city. When Frederick Marriott, owner of the News-Letter, found that the most popular kind of reading material was satire, he allowed his reporters unlimited freedom in resorting to invective and personal attack. He succeeded so well in making his paper the most abusive in San Francisco that in the 1870's it was banned as immoral by the University of Michigan.[5]

Bierce and Marriott's other writers often had to be ready for gun-play with the enraged and indignant victims of their satire, and half a dozen newspaper men lost their lives in the first few years of Bierce's stint on the News-Letter in San Francisco. Bierce was not worried but only highly amused when he read that a writer for a Sacramento "scandal sheet" had been publicly horsewhipped by an infuriated woman.[6]

The News-Letter's emphasis on the macabre and horrible was its specialty. The customary department

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[4]Ibid., pp. 74-80.

[5]Franklin Walker, San Francisco's Literary Frontier (New York, 1939), pp. 242-249.

[6]Ibid., p. 246.

devoted to births, marriages, and deaths was entitled "The Cradle, the Altar, and the Tomb." The feature page was written by the Town Crier, who was allowed to say almost anything he pleased. The News-Letter made a special policy of exposing medical quacks under a skull and cross-bones and the caption: "Gentlemen, you call yourselves doctors. Have you a diploma?"[7]

In addition to duties as editor and writer of the feature page, Bierce inherited the writing of the popular Town Crier column. It was soon evident that he could give his readers what they wanted: a combination of irony and horror. Having watched flies crawl on battered skulls in the Civil War, he was flippant about death in a manner that satisfied even the San Franciscans, who had long made a specialty of the macabre.[8]

Even the less sensational newspapers of the city resorted to the use of the gruesome methods of the News-Letter. The Bulletin, for example, carried the following editorial on the discovery of a baby's corpse in an ash-can:

> It seems impossible for a man to dig potatoes in a garden or excavate a post hole in a front yard, without turning up some little innocent thing that has been dumped there without a coffin or shroud. Yesterday the body of a baby was found lying at one of the wharves in a tin-can. When it comes to

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[7] Ibid., pp. 248-249.

[8] Ibid., p. 250.

> canning babies, putting them up, so to speak, "for exportation," as though they were oysters, shrimps, or jellies, it becomes time to speak and remonstrate.[9]

It was much in this vein that Bierce commented weekly on the violent accidents, suicides, and attempts at mayhem that were reported in the daily press. "The Italians continue their cheerful national recreation of stabbing one another," he wrote. "On Monday evening one was found badly gashed in the stomach, going about his business with his entrails thrown over his arm."[10]

As the Town Crier, Bierce never missed an opportunity to be ironical about an execution: "A man in Vermont was recently hanged by the neck until he was dead, dead, dead, and for the trifling offense of stealing another's shirt. He had previously removed the head that the garment might not be soiled with hair oil."[11]

At this early date Bierce was already specializing in suicide, which he was to use later in at least three of

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[9] The San Francisco Bulletin, January 20, 1864, cited in Walker, p. 250.

[10] Bierce, "Town Crier," The San Francisco News-Letter, 1869, cited in Walker, p. 250. Since every quotation from the "Town Crier" which appears in this chapter was originally printed in The San Francisco News-Letters of 1869 and later cited in Walker, all further footnote references to the column in this chapter will include only the title "Town Crier," followed by Walker and the number of the page in Walker's book on which the citation was made.

[11] "Town Crier," Walker, p. 250.

his short stories: "One Officer, One Man"; "The Story of a Conscience"; and "The Mocking-Bird." Among methods of suicide, he recommended white arsenic: "Ratsbane is winning golden opinions upon all sides as a perfectly safe and efficacious specific for life's fitful fever." But he warned against interfering with the workings of poison and so clouding ethical problems. "One day last week," he wrote, "a woman of the Brooklyn Hotel attempted to refute some implications against her character by passing through an ordeal of arsenic. She was speedily pumped dry by a meddling medico, and her chastity is still a bone of contention."[12]

Bierce's columns were often devoted to the discussion of strange, eerie happenings. He once wrote of an insane woman found sleeping in a cemetery: "Mary's preference for lodging with dead men, is, I confess, indefensible,--she may not be demented; she is indisputably unique."[13]

Among other devices for causing shock and expressing irreverence Bierce developed his paragraphs of general and local jottings, gaining his effects by terse comments on events, placed in startling juxtaposition.[14] The following composite paragraph illustrates the method:

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[12]"Town Crier," Walker, p. 251.

[13]Bierce, "Prattler," The San Francisco Argonaut, n.d., cited in McWilliams, p. 38.

[14]Walker, p. 251.

> Woman fell in the sewer. Sweets to the sweet.--Two men fell, each in his respective fit.--Man hangs himself in a barn.--63 persons went to heaven in July.--187 couples married in July. The nights have been uncomfortably warm.--Successful abortion. Woman died.--Several babies staved off.--Mr. Bancroft is about to build a new sty on Market Street.--French priest has abandoned the errors of the Romish for those of the Protestant Church.--Olympic muscle men elected performing and executive apes.--The weekly rape is of a milder nature. Money will settle it this time.--An insurance company was robbed. Tit for tat.[15]

The savage behavior of Christians was also one of Bierce's favorite themes, which he used to inveigh against the persecution of the Chinese by those who preached brotherly love.[16] After one such episode Bierce wrote:

> On last Sunday afternoon a Chinaman passing guilelessly along Dupont Street was assailed with a tempest of bricks and stones from the steps of the First Congregational Church. At the completion of this devotional exercise the Sunday-scholars retired within the hallowed portals of the sanctuary, to hear about Christ Jesus, and Him crucified.[17]

Bierce, however, did not confine his comments completely to violence and suicide. Thoroughly enjoying the license granted him, he sent shafts in all directions: sports, reformers, the public schools, the feminist movement, and the stage.[18] At first Bierce's satire grew quite justifiably out of his indignation at seeing very

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[15] "Town Crier," Walker, p. 251.

[16] Walker, p. 253.

[17] "Town Crier," Walker, p. 253.

[18] Fatout, pp. 88-89.

unfair social and political practices and abuses, but soon his criticism became impulsive and irrational. He once hounded a mediocre poet named Lezinsky to such a degree in his column that the poor man shot himself. Another time Bierce was challenged to a duel because of a vicious remark he made about the aberrations of a prominent citizen. In addition, an enraged man once walked into Bierce's office and struck him in the face. Bierce drew his gun and would have wounded the man had the editor not stopped him.[19] Obviously Bierce brought upon himself much of the violence to which he was exposed.

Murder cases seem to have been one of his favorite assignments. He had a belief that anyone who committed a crime more serious than simple larceny should be executed. In signed newspaper stories Bierce often commented on the grossness of a crime and on the callousness of the accused. One particularly grisly murder case involved the slaying of dozens of settlers in Mussel Slough, California, by the notorious gunman Walter Crowe. Crowe was hired by the railroads to rid valuable land of settlers, but he was shot to death before his task was completely finished.[20]

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[19]McWilliams, pp. 126, 129.

[20]Ibid., pp. 136, 159.

News stories of mysterious disappearances also fascinated Bierce. He often clipped reports of missing persons and used them later as a basis for such stories as "The Moonlit Road" and "The Stranger."[21]

Through the years Bierce became known as "Bitter Bierce" and "The Wickedest Man in San Francisco." First on the News-Letter in the late 1860's, then on Frank Pixley's Argonaut in the 1870's, and on his own paper, the Wasp, in the 1880's, Bierce continued his virulent kind of journalism. He was one of the worst hated and most widely read writers on the West Coast.[22] When the Wasp collapsed financially in 1887, he was hired by the Hearst chain to write special columns for the San Francisco Examiner, the ultra-sensational paper purchased by Hearst in 1883. His association with the Hearst papers lasted twenty years, and during this period he had freedom from editorial duties to write fiction.[23]

Bierce, however, did not think highly of journalism or of Hearst's papers which practiced yellow journalism. To him newspaper work was only a trade at which he was

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[21] Ibid., pp. 225-226.

[22] Leroy J. Nations, "Ambrose Bierce: The Gray Wolf of American Letters," South Atlantic Quarterly, XXV (July, 1926), 68.

[23] Fatout, pp. 156-157.

quite proficient and could earn a comfortable living.[24] C. Hartley Grattan has estimated that 90 per cent of Bierce's creative energy went into his journalistic activity.[25] Quite naturally this type of writing influenced his more artistic endeavors. For example, he transferred the emotional appeal of shocking news stories, the fear and the dread, into his short stories. He considered fear a wholesome emotion, and he held the horror story in high esteem as an art form.

Science

Bierce's interest in horror was also affected by the scientific and pseudo-scientific vogues of the last three decades of the nineteenth century. As a newspaper writer and reader of contemporary periodical literature, Bierce was aware of the scientific interests of the time. He read Herbert Spencer,[26] the popularizer of Darwin's

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[24]McWilliams, p. 137. [25]Grattan, p. 99.

[26]Harry Lynn Sheller, "The Satire of Ambrose Bierce--Its Objects, Forms, Devices, and Possible Origins," unpublished doctoral dissertation, Department of English, The University of Southern California, Los Angeles, California, 1945, cited in Mary E. Grenander, "The Critical Theories of Ambrose Bierce," unpublished doctoral dissertation, Department of English Language and Literature, The University of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois, 1948, p. 4. Spencer's name is included in a partial enumeration of writers of philosophy and science whom Bierce either read or made allusions to in his writing. Included in the list are the following: Heraclitus, Empedocles, Plato, Aristotle, Milton, Bacon, Kant, Locke, Hugh Miller, Comte, Emerson, Henry T. Buckle, and Charles Herbert Lees. Besides these, Sheller writes, "there are passages in his work that show his keen interest in . . . current magazines."

controversial doctrines of evolution, and even wrote a humorous essay about evolution, "The Civilization of the Monkey."[27]

As the public interest in science increased, newspapers and magazines began to devote more space to news and stories of scientific interest. Newspapers often reprinted speeches or treatises by important figures in the realm of science, such periodicals as Popular Science Monthly flourished, and high class literary magazines also favored the subject and frequently announced their devotion on their mastheads.[28]

The sensational newspapers, in particular, took advantage of the popular interest by playing up double pages devoted to exaggerated and sensationalized versions of chosen phases of science or pseudo-science. Pseudo-science--related often to archaeology, medicine, psychology, or psychic research--gave readers the satisfaction of feeling themselves being educated at the same time that they were being thrilled; but it aroused the active resentment of scientists against newspapers in general. Typical of the sensational newspaper treatment of science was Morrill Goddard's story in Hearst's

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[27]Bierce, "The Civilization of the Monkey," Works, IX, 32-47.

[28]Arthur Hobson Quinn, The Literature of the American People (New York, 1951), p. 771.

New York Journal on October 4, 1896, with the heading "Real American Monsters and Dragons," growing out of the discovery of some fossil remains of dinosaurs and illustrated by a shocking half-page drawing entitled "The Jumping Laelaps of 5,000 Years Ago."[29]

So far as is known, Bierce did not make any deep, profound study of any branch of science. Such knowledge as he had was gleaned primarily from magazine articles and popular scientific treatises available to the average layman. Although he was impressed with the visible wonders of electricity and chemistry and their promise of a new and better life for mankind, he was concerned even more with the strange, psychical manifestations which scientists scoffed at but could not explain. Spiritualism, hypnotism, and extrasensory perception[30] seem particularly to have interested him.

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[29]Mott, p. 524.

[30]Spiritualism and extrasensory perception are discussed separately because of the different uses Bierce made of the two in his fiction. In several of his stories professional clairvoyants bring spirits into contact with the physical world by means of clairvoyance, a type of extrasensory perception. However, in many of his stories characters who are not professional clairvoyants and not particularly interested in the occult are, nevertheless, visited by dreams or visions of either a clairvoyant or telepathic nature. According to J. B. Rhine, "Psychical Research," The Encyclopedia Americana, XXII (New York, 1959), 732-733b, clairvoyance is the act of perceiving an external object or event no matter where or how far back in history it occurred. Telepathy, strictly speaking, is the direct communion of mind with mind, whether in or out of the body, communion without the assistance of any of the physical senses. In the following discussion clairvoyance and telepathy are discussed under the term extrasensory perception.

Spiritualism in America had reached the peak of its popularity in the 1850's,[31] but even as late as 1900 there was still a noticeable interest in it, as one may see from the many magazine articles published during the 1880's and 1890's. The following articles are typical of those treating of spiritualism during this period: "Mystery Mongering," Saturday Review of Politics, Science, and Art, CVI (London, November 10, 1883), 595; "Miracles and Medium Craft," Fortnightly Review, XXXX (Autumn, 1883), 263; A. E. Newton, "Why I Am a Spiritualist," North American Review, CXXXXVII (January, 1891), 654; M. J. Savage, "Experiences with Spiritualists," Forum, VII (December, 1889), 449; R. Hodgson, "Glimmerings of a Future Life," Forum, XXI (April, 1896), 247-256; "Scientific Reports on Spiritualism and Kindred Phenomena," Overland Monthly, XVI (September, 1890), 316-326.

Oddly enough, most of these articles advocated acceptance of spiritualism. For example, A. B. Richmond in "Is There a Tomorrow for the Human Race?" argued that

> . . . the laboratory of the scientist is not the place where the question of the immortality of the human soul is to be decided. . . . Science errs in her conclusions as frequently as do our senses, and when the latter tell us what they see, and hear, and feel, including those from another life, we cannot disbelieve them, simply because the former doubts.[32]

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[31]Walker, p. 201.

[32]A. B. Richmond, "Is There a Tomorrow for the Human Race?" Arena, I (March, 1890), 474-476.

Bierce first became acquainted with spiritualism as a reporter in San Francisco, where many mediums held public seances and attracted unusually large crowds. Spiritualism received much publicity in the San Francisco papers, for almost every writer of the period was participating in the current debate about the existence of ghosts.[33]

The horrors (and some of the humor) of spiritualism were described vividly in the Era of June 17, 1866:

> Your hair commences growing long, and your eyes assume a wild glare, and you believe in nothing and everything at once, and you become a friend of progress, and talk of naught but "influences," "influxes," "affinities," and "conditions"; and finally you kick over the traces of reason and are borne howling along Montgomery Street in the arms of two able-bodied policemen on your way to the Stockton Asylum.[34]

Within the space of a month the Bulletin reported three cases of insanity arising from exposure to spiritualism; one of the victims actually went berserk while attending a Friends of Progress meeting and was taken straight to the asylum.[35]

Though Bierce's remarks on spiritualism were usually confined to his newspaper columns, his interest in the actual practice is particularly reflected in several of

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[33]Walker, p. 201.

[34]Mark Twain, The San Francisco Era, n. d., cited in Walker, p. 203.

[35]Walker, p. 203.

his short stories, notably "The Moonlit Road," "Beyond the Wall," and "An Inhabitant of Carcosa."

Hypnotism or mesmerism was revived as a subject of much interest and controversy in the 1880's and 1890's when Bierce was writing his stories. Many magazine articles and popular treatises attempted to explain hypnotism and warn of its use by anyone except trained, competent personnel. The following articles are representative: "Ghosts, Dreams, and Hypnotism," North American Review, CXXXXVI (May, 1888), 704; R. O. Mason, "Concerning a Psychic Medium in Hypnotism," Arena, III (January, 1891), 654; E. Gurney and F. H. Meyers, "Mesmerism," Nineteenth Century, XIV (October, 1883), 695; "Real Wonder in the New Mesmerism," Spectator, LXX (January 14, 1893), 42-43; E. P. Evans, "Modern Miracle: Hypnotism," Popular Science Monthly, XXXXIII (June, 1893), 192-196; S. Jarvis, "Ascent of Life or Psychic Laws and Forces of Nature," Arena, IX (December, 1893), 1-25.

Since nineteenth century science was not able to explain fully how hypnosis worked, the mystery surrounding the practice received much publicity.[36] Such strange terrors did not escape Bierce's notice, for several of his stories concern the phenomenon and its effects: "The

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[36]J. B. Rhine, "Hypnosis," The Encyclopedia Americana, XIV (New York, 1959), 604-605.

Hypnotist," "The Realm of the Unreal," "The Man and the Snake," and "An Affair at Brownville."

Extrasensory perception also interested Bierce greatly as a source of wonder and terror. Late nineteenth century periodical literature particularly abounds with articles about extrasensory perception. Examples of such articles are these: "The Sixth Sense and How to Develop It," Arena, II (September, 1890), 509-511; B. F. Austin, "Four Remarkable Psychical Occurrences," Arena, XX (September, 1898), 323-381; Samuel L. Clemens, "Will Mental Telegraphy Become a Working Force?" Review of Reviews, VI (January, 1893), 652; "Professor Crookes on Thought Transformation," Scientific American, LXXVI (March 13, 1897), 163; E. J. Houston, "Shall We Have a Thought Machine?" Review of Reviews, VI (September, 1892), 191.

The characteristic attitude of nineteenth century writers toward extrasensory perception is reflected in R. A. Proctor's article, "Have Ghosts Been Seen?"

> In fine, it appears to me that the evidence regarding the communication of impressions from mind to mind over great distances, in such sort that apparitions of distant persons dying or suffering are seen by their friends and relatives, is too strong to be rejected by any conscientious student of facts. Science is not justified in rejecting this evidence merely because no explanation is readily available.[37]

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[37] R. A. Proctor, "Have Ghosts Been Seen?" Cosmopolitan Magazine, IV (January, 1888), 367.

Bierce probably learned about the phenomenon from reading such articles and from his own experiences in San Francisco, where many otherwise normal people claimed to have strange visions in which the death or injury of a loved one was foretold. For example, Henry George published an article in the Californian in which he told of a premonition that came to a California sailor in Callao that something was wrong at home in Scotland; months later he found that his father had murdered his mother on the night that he had received the psychic message on the other side of the globe.[38]

About ten of Bierce's horror stories make use of extrasensory perception or premonitions. The best known of these are "A Psychological Shipwreck," "The Secret of Macarger's Gulch," "The Death of Halpin Frayser," "The Mocking-Bird," "A Diagnosis of Death," "One of Twins," and "Staley Fleming's Hallucination."

Among the more important general external influences of Bierce's life, then, journalism and science helped shape and heighten his interest in the strange, the bizarre, and the horrible. Journalism trained him to be aware of the mysterious and unusual, and taught him the

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[38]Henry George, "The Boatswain's Story," The San Francisco Californian, August 5, 1865, cited in Walker, p. 200.

literary value of feature story material. Any inexplicable psychical or physical manifestation greatly interested him and usually became the starting point of a story. Although his reading in science and psychology was limited primarily to popular magazines and treatises, Bierce learned enough about spiritualism, hypnotism, and extrasensory perception to use them effectively in some of his best work.

Perhaps even more than in subject matter, however, journalism and science influenced Bierce in method. Despite his often professed distaste for certain journalistic practices,[39] his characteristic approach--modeled after newspaper writing and scientific reporting--was cool, objective, reportorial, matter-of-fact. This tone, this quality of style, though well known in later artistic fiction, was quite new and fresh in the late nineteenth century and made for Bierce his fame.

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[39]In an essay entitled "Newspapers" in his Collected Works, IX, 151-158, Bierce made it clear that he condemned such common newspaper practices as false or misleading advertising, devotion to "the prejudices of the ignorant," and poor, ungrammatical writing. To him, creative writing was one of the highest and most artistic forms of literature, journalism one of the least artistic. He is quoted by Grattan, p. 100, as saying that journalism "is so low a thing that it may be legitimately used as a means of anything deemed worth accomplishing. . . . Literature is an art; . . . it is not a form of benevolence. It has nothing to do with 'reform' and when used as a means of reform suffers accordingly and unjustly."

CHAPTER IV

SPECIFIC LITERARY INFLUENCES AND THEORIES ABOUT FICTION

The Gothic Tradition[1]

One of the most important literary influences which inspired Bierce's emphasis on horror seems to have been the Gothic story of horror. Gothicism was an efflorescence of the Romantic Movement. Horace Walpole is said to have begun the mode in England with his story of magic and mystery, The Castle of Otranto, printed in London in 1764.[2]

The primary purpose of the writers of Gothic romances was to create an impression of terror in the reader by the use of various stage properties: ghosts, clinking chains, specters, blood, severed bodies, charnel houses, haunted

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[1]Kenneth Clark in The Gothic Revival (London, 1950), pp. 16-19, explains that the term Gothic came from a single medieval Germanic tribe and to the eighteenth-century neoclassicists was synonymous with barbaric. To the romanticists of the next generation, however, the word was looked upon with favor and suggested whatever was natural, medieval, primitive, free, or romantic. They praised such writers as Shakespeare and Spenser because of their Gothic elements--variety, richness, and mystery.

[2]Edith Birkhead, The Tale of Terror (London, n. d.), p. 16.

castles, and other weird paraphernalia. This type of story was thoroughly exploited by Clara Reeves, Ann Radcliffe, Matthew G. Lewis, Charles Brockden Brown, Beckford, and others later in the eighteenth century in England and America. The most interesting of these early writers was Matthew G. Lewis, whose novel The Monk, about a perverted Catholic priest, won him immediate fame and the epithet of "Monk" Lewis. Lord Byron was deeply influenced by this book, and several other Romantic poets made references to it.[3]

In the first half of the nineteenth century Poe further developed the short story of horror by adding such details as old manuscripts, miniature portraits, pseudo-scientific phenomena, and the use of the first person for self-psychoanalysis.[4]

The tradition of Gothic horror, humanized somewhat by the poetry of the romantics, made fanciful by Hawthorne, and sharpened by Poe, was very familiar to Bierce. His Melancholy Author was amazed that the appeal of Gothicism was not universal as he asked the Timorous Reporter the following question in "Some Disadvantages of Genius":

> Great Scott! Has [everyone] not heard of The Thousand and One Nights, of The Three Spaniards,

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[3] Ibid., pp. 16-20, 65, 66, 72, 120.

[4] Ibid., pp. 218-220.

> of Horace Walpole, of "Monk" Lewis, of De Quincey, of Maturin, Ingemann, Blicher, Balzac, Hoffman, Fitz-James O'Brien?[5]

Scholarly James Watkins, an employee with Bierce on the News-Letter in the late 1860's, recognized Bierce's talent for writing and taught him the literary value of horror.[6] In 1874 Watkins wrote Bierce the following advice, encouraging him to use his imagination and challenging him to be a new Monk Lewis, with certain important differences:

> The sort of sensation that waited upon Mrs. Radcliffe's and Monk Lewis' efforts affords some hint of the sort of career the new "Monk" and "Castle of Udolpho" would run. The work they did in stupid vaults you execute in the secret chambers of the soul; the poor limelight effects they worked on a painted stage, you would sear with lightning on the face of nature. Your work expands the human mind.
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> . . . . . .
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> The supreme art with a pen is to-day, as it has been throughout the history of letters, the art of story telling--of telling a story that has no reason for its existence outside of its own interest. It must illustrate nothing, be devoid of moral, make no one think; in fact, it must paralyze the faculty of thinking: It must purely and simply entertain. That has been the character of all work that has been published from the "Arabian Nights" to "Treasure Island." This faculty you possess in the highest degree, though you have not chosen to exercise it dissociated from the thinking faculties. A man puts himself into a novel. He puts nothing but his imagination into a story.[7]

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[5]Bierce, "Some Disadvantages of Genius," Works, X, 296.

[6]McWilliams, p. 234.

[7]Letter from James Watkins of San Francisco to Ambrose Bierce in London, 1874, cited in McWilliams, p. 234.

With the publication of his first horror story, "The Haunted Valley," in the Overland Monthly in 1880, readers noted that Bierce was indeed dedicated to the Gothic tradition, "its roots in the macabre and its branches shrouded in mystery."[8] Along with Watkins, Bierce held to the tenets of romanticism, and he read and admired the writers of the Romantic Movement generally. The Gothic romancers were especially familiar to him and gave him his first and strongest literary inspiration.

The Influence of Edgar Allan Poe

"I should say that the greatest American that we know about . . . was Edgar Allan Poe," Bierce wrote in 1901.[9] When he began his career as a creative writer in the 1880's, Bierce naturally adopted Poe's theories of fiction and followed his example.[10]

When Bierce's collected stories first appeared in the early 1890's, critics immediately began to comment on his similarity to Poe.[11] The novelist Gertrude Atherton wrote

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[8]Walker, p. 281

[9]Bierce, "Who Are Great?" Works, X, 249.

[10]McWilliams, p. 229.

[11]Specific differences in the techniques of Poe and Bierce will be treated in the following chapter in the discussion of Bierce's methods of provoking horror.

that in point of art, "Bierce overlooks Poe."[12] A writer in Bookman observed that no American, "with the single exception of Poe," had written stories "that could compare with Bierce's."[13]

Scholarly criticism in the twentieth century expresses varying opinions concerning Poe's influence on Bierce. Frederic Taber Cooper wrote in high praise: "It is not too much to say that within his own chosen field--the grim, uncompromising horror story, whether actual or supernatural, he stands among American writers second only to Edgar Allan Poe."[14] A reviewer in Current Literature pointed out specific similarities: "Like Poe, Bierce has dwelt with the occult and the terrible; like Poe, also, he has been fascinated by science. . . . He has tried his hand at everything Poe has tried."[15] Percy H. Boynton in 1927 noted further that "in scale, determination of effect, adoption of tone, and establishment of background" Poe and Bierce are similar.[16]

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[12]Gertrude Atherton, "The Literary Development of California," Cosmopolitan Magazine, X (January, 1891), 271.

[13]"Review of In the Midst of Life," Bookman, VII (May, 1898), 89-90.

[14]Frederic Taber Cooper, Some American Story Tellers (New York, 1911), p. 345.

[15]"The Underground Reputation of Ambrose Bierce," Current Literature, XLVII (September, 1909), 280.

[16]Percy H. Boynton, More Contemporary Americans (Chicago, 1927), pp. 89-90.

Two of the best critical articles on the Poe-Bierce relationship have appeared since 1930. Arthur M. Miller, the most scholarly of the later critics, declared that Bierce followed Poe's theories because "he did not doubt the adequacy of Poe's story method."[17] In 1945 George Snell remarked:

> Bierce modelled his form and his subject matter directly upon Poe, and while he never achieved the artistry or the psychological overtones of his master, he exhibited some aspects of the imagination never seen before. Irked as he was by contemporary jibes at his Poe-idolatry, it is nevertheless perfectly apparent that Poe was his inspiration and exemplar, and hardly any other influence can be detected in his work.[18]

The exact relationship between Poe and Bierce as literary artists is even more observable when certain of Bierce's literary pronouncements are compared with Poe's. In "Nathaniel Hawthorne" Poe states his preference for the short story over the novel as an art form:

> The ordinary novel is objectionable, from its length. . . . As it cannot be read at one sitting, it deprives itself, or course, of the immense force derivable from totality. Worldly interests intervening during the pauses of perusal, modify, annul, or counteract, in a great or less degree, the impressions of the book. But simple cessation in reading would, of itself, be sufficient to destroy the true unity. In the brief tale, however, the author is

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[17]Arthur M. Miller, "The Influence of Edgar Allan Poe on Ambrose Bierce," American Literature, IV (May, 1932), 150.

[18]George Snell, "Poe Redivivus," Arizona Quarterly, I (Spring, 1945), 50.

> enabled to carry out the fulness of his intention . . . a certain unique or single effect . . . with . . . care and skill, a picture is at length painted.[19]

In "The Novel" Bierce expresses similar views:

> The novel bears the same relation to literature that the panorama bears to painting. With whatever skill and feeling the panorama is painted, it must lack that basic quality in all art, unity, totality of effect. As it cannot all be seen at once, its parts must be seen successively, each effacing the one seen before; and at the last there remains no coherent and harmonious memory of the work. It is the same with a story too long to be read with a virgin attention at a single sitting. The short story does not, at least, cloy attention, confuse with overlaid impressions and efface its own effect.[20]

Bierce seems to have drawn upon Poe for several ideas: length, unity, totality of effect, and the idea of a single sitting. Even the wording is very similar--Poe: "As it cannot be read at one sitting"; Bierce: "As it cannot be all seen at once," and later includes the "single sitting." Moreover, Poe's phrase, "impressions of the book," becomes "memory of the work." Both authors refer to painting, and all that Bierce really added is the word panorama.

The two authors often concur on broad literary principles. For example, Poe made the following remark on realism:

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[19]Edgar Allan Poe, "Nathaniel Hawthorne," The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe, Colonial Edition, VI (Boston and New York, 1884), 116.

[20]Bierce, "The Novel," Works, X, 18.

> The defenders of this pitiable stuff uphold it on the ground of its truthfulness. . . . This truthfulness is the one overwhelming defect. . . . In my view, if an artist must paint decayed cheeses, his merit will lie in their looking as little like decayed cheeses as possible.[21]

Bierce also strongly objected to "those story writers of the Reporter School" who "hold that what is not interesting in life becomes interesting in letters."[22] He commented that the novelist, who is the same as a realist, will ultimately have to give way to the writer of romances. He insisted that the romancer

> . . . can represent life, not as it is, but as it might be; character, not as he finds it, but as he wants it. His plot knows no law but that of its own artistic development; his incidents do not require the authenticating hand and seal of any censorship but that of taste.[23]

Furthermore, both writers emphasized the importance of imagination as a quality which the successful writer of fiction must possess. Poe wrote that a writer's "distinctive trait is invention, creation, imagination, . . .--a trait which, in the literature of fiction, is positively worth all the rest."[24] For Bierce, imagination was the faculty by which one attains to "a knowledge of the

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[21]Poe, "Marginalia," The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe, VI, 349.

[22]Bierce, "The Short Story," Works, X, 249.

[23]Bierce, "The Novel," Works, X, 22.

[24]Poe, "Nathaniel Hawthorne," The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe, VI, 119.

meaning and message of things."[25] He spoke of "that supreme and almost sufficient literary technique, imagination,"[26] and declared that "imagination is nine parts of the writing trade. With enough of that all things are possible."[27]

In a way Bierce and Poe are similar in placing considerable importance on economy of style. Poe believed that in the most artistically written story "every word tells, and there is not a word which does not tell."[28] Bierce despised "a story cumbered with trivialities and nonessentials" and commented that many stories "could . . . be bettered by cutting out a half or three-quarters" of the material.[29] This remark is particularly relevant in the light of the fact that not one of Bierce's stories is over twelve pages long; the average is three or four.

Poe and Bierce were in almost complete agreement on the question of probability. Poe wrote:

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[25]Bierce, "Fetishism," Works, X, 325.

[26]Bierce, "The Short Story," Works, X, 239.

[27]Letter from Bierce to Ruth Robertson, March 1, 1911, cited in Ambrose Bierce, The Letters of Ambrose Bierce, edited by Bertha Clark Pope (San Francisco, 1922), p. 173. Hereafter this work will be referred to as Letters, followed by exact page numbers.

[28]Poe, "Nathaniel Hawthorne," The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe, VI, 121.

[29]Bierce, "The Novel," Works, X, 19.

> The theory of chance, or as the mathematicians term it, the Calculus of Probabilities, has this remarkable peculiarity, that is, truth in general is in direct proportion with its fallacy in particular.[30]

Bierce said:

> Probability? Nothing is so improbable as what is true. . . . Fiction has nothing to say to probability; the capable writer gives it not a moment's attention, except to make what is related seem probable in reading--seem true.[31]

Poe's influence on Bierce's practice is as great as on his theory. At least three of Bierce's stories are very similar in plot to those of Poe. Bierce's "Moxon's Master" and Poe's story "Maelzel's Chess-Player" both involve a robot who plays chess and causes chaos and horror. Bierce's story appeared in the Sunday Examiner Magazine in April, 1899, over thirty years after he had taken up writing as a career and was perhaps an indication of Poe's continuing influence.

Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado" and Bierce's "The Widower Turmore" both involve a much-hated person being walled in alive. "Beyond the Wall" by Bierce and "The Fall of the House of Usher" by Poe are very similar in that in both stories a young man makes a visit to the home of a boyhood friend whom he has not seen in a long while. Both stories begin with careful attention to details

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[30]Poe, "A Chapter of Suggestions," The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe, VI, 327.

[31]Bierce, "The Short Story," Works, X, 245-246.

describing the gloomy atmosphere and formidable facade of the friend's house.

Arthur M. Miller feels that Poe's influence is typified in Bierce's stories in at least three ways: a studied use of Poe's material, combined with a theme taken elsewhere, resulting in a powerful story; a short incident closely following the plan of a Poe tale, imbedded in a longer narrative not otherwise Poesque; and a romantic "echo" of a general sort at the beginning of a story.[32]

Some of Bierce's other stories suggest the further use of Poe's ideas. For example, the horror in Bierce's "Granny Magone" and "John Mortonson's Funeral" is inspired by a cat perched on the head of a dead body, an idea used earlier by Poe in "The Black Cat." Bierce may also have copied the idea of premature burial from Poe, who used it in "Ligeia," "Premature Burial," "The Fall of the House of Usher," and "Bernice." Bierce used this gimmick in such stories as "One Summer Night" and "A Bottomless Grave." Miller states that whereas Poe had taken great pains to legitimize the device of premature burial, arguing that it is not an unusual occurrence, Bierce took it for granted and imitated and stretched it to achieve grim, quizzical, or humorous results.[33]

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[32]Miller, p. 143.

[33]Ibid., p. 145.

It is obvious, then, that Bierce's estimate of Poe as a writer was quite high and that he accepted almost without change Poe's pronouncements on the novel and rules about the brief tale. He kept in close agreement with Poe on such points as realism, probability, and use of coincidence; in practice he incorporated plot fragments, devices, and ideas, once used by Poe, into his own writing to such an extent as to indicate that the works of the earlier writer must have served him well as both source material and inspiration. More important, though, Bierce modified what he borrowed and combined different themes with such success that everything has a macabre quality that is his own.[34]

Bierce's Dicta on the Horror Story

Although Bierce added nothing to Poe's literary theories, he was much more explicit than Poe on three principles concerning the horror story: the high artistic value of the story of terror, the importance of moderation in describing horrors, and the proper conditions under which a horror story should be read.

In stressing the artistic or literary value of the horror story, Bierce first pointed out the enduring fascination of the terrible and the mysterious:

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[34] Ibid., p. 150.

> Tales of the tragic and the supernatural are the earliest utterances in every literature. When the savage begins to talk he begins to tell wonder tales of death and mystery--of terror and the occult. Tapping, as they do, two of the three great mother-lodes of human interest, these tales are a constant phenomenon--the most permanent, because the most fascinating element in letters.[35]

Neale quotes Bierce as saying:

> No matter how great the intellect, however extended one's experience, how often superstitious beliefs, signs, omens, and other phenomena are disproved, our forefathers fastened upon us a heritage that we cannot dissipate.[36]

Elsewhere Bierce commented on the importance of the horror story as a means of relieving psychological tension:

> One must [sometimes] escape from the obvious into the mysterious. Ghosts there were and witches there must have been, since so many were burned. What better proof would one want of their existence than that? Look at the Bible. It's full of Endors. For the purposes of art, ghosts might stalk about today and witches still ride broomsticks.[37]

Bierce maintained that tragedy and horror in literature were almost synonymous and felt that some of his own stories of horror had elements of tragedy. He once wrote Ruth Robertson that "tragedy holds the highest and most permanent place in the world's literature . . . , but it has the divvel's [sic] own time getting it." Editors

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[35]Bierce, "Some Disadvantages of Genius," Works, X, 296.

[36]Neale, p. 187.

[37]Joseph Noel, Footloose in Arcadia (New York, 1940), p. 75.

prefer sentimental literature and accept tragic or "horror stories only from a writer with an established reputation," he explained.[38]

He was also quite explicit in his warning that writers of horror stories not produce too much horror and thus fail to attain the illusion of reality. He once distinguished between the "terrible" and the "horrible," the latter term evidently not being equated with that which produced horror, but used in a sense which connoted too much horror or an overabundance of shock.[39] Thus he rewrote "John Mortonson's Funeral," originally by his son Leigh, because it had been in a form which was very crude and too horrible.[40]

Furthermore, Bierce defended such literary examples of the tragic, the terrible, and even the ghastly as the murders in Shakespeare's tragedies, the Ancient Mariner's dead comrades, and the ingenious horrors of Dante's underworld. He felt that they were all vivid, yet shocked no one because they were realistic, not overdone, and produced

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[38]Letter from Bierce to Ruth Robertson, March 20, 1913, cited in Letters, p. 192.

[39]Letter from Bierce to George Sterling, March 12, 1906, cited in Letters, p. 69.

[40]Grenander, p. 69.

no false conception: "If they did, they would be without artistic value," he argued.[41]

Moreover, lack of moderation in describing horrors might provoke laughter instead of fear or terror.[42] The Chinese dragon, his favorite example of the lack of restraint in art, is used humorously to illustrate his point in the following passage:

> Did you ever observe and consider the dragon in Chinese art? With what an awful ferocity it is endowed by its creator--the expanded mouth with its furniture of curling tongue and impossible teeth, its big fiery eyes, scaly body, huge claws and spiny back! All the horrible qualities the artist knows he lavished upon this pet of his imagination. The result is an animal which one rather wishes to meet and would not hesitate to cuff. Unrestricted exaggeration has defeated its own purpose and made ludicrous what was meant to be terrible. That is, the artist has lacked the strength of restraint. A true artist could so represent the common domestic bear, or the snake of the field, as to smite the spectator with a nameless dread. He could do so by merely giving to the creature's eye an expression of malevolence which would need no assistance from claw, fang, or posture.[43]

Bierce was also outspoken on another principle concerning the horror story, that of the reader's obligation to the author. Walter Neale quotes Bierce as emphasizing the importance of partial darkness as an atmosphere for the reading of a horror story. "The fear of darkness is

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[41]Bierce, "An Insurrection of the Peasantry," Works, X, 204-205.

[42]Ibid.

[43]Bierce, "As to Cartooning," Works, X, 79-80.

natural and perhaps is never outgrown," Bierce said. "It is an inheritance from primitive ancestors; besides one is at a disadvantage in the dark." He then explained that it is this "disadvantage" which the author of a horror story hopes to use in achieving his effect.[44]

This principle is voiced in more detail by horror writer James Colston in Bierce's story, "The Suitable Surroundings." In the following manner the writer accosts Willard Marsh, whom he finds reading one of his horror stories in a newspaper while riding on the streetcar:[45]

> . . . . Has the reader no duties corresponding to his privileges? You have paid five cents for that newspaper. It is yours. You have the right to read it when and where you will. Much of what is in it is neither helped nor harmed by time and place and mood; some of it actually requires to be read at once--while it is fizzing. But my story is not made of that character. It is not "the very latest advices" from Ghostland. You are not expected to keep yourself au courant with what is going on in the realm of spooks. The stuff will keep until you have leisure to put yourself into the frame of mind appropriate to the sentiment of the piece--which I respectfully submit that you cannot do in a street car, even if you are the only passenger. The solitude is not of the right sort. An author has rights which the reader is bound to respect.
>
> The right to the reader's undivided attention. To deny him this is immoral. To make him share your attention with the rattle of a street car, the moving

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[44]Neale, p. 187.

[45]Although the remarks on the "suitable surroundings" in which a horror story should be read are made by a character in a Bierce story and not by Bierce himself, they are, nevertheless, consistent with comments on the subject written by him elsewhere.

> panorama of the crowds on the sidewalks, and the buildings beyond--with any of the thousands of distractions which make our customary environment--is to treat him with gross injustice. By God, it is infamous. . . . My stuff in this morning's Messenger is plainly subheaded "A Ghost Story." That is ample notice to all. Every honorable reader will understand it as prescribing by implication the conditions under which the work is to be read.
>
> A story of horror should be read in solitude--at night--by 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 can try to inspire.[46]

Thus Bierce would make the reader as well as the writer responsible for the effect of the horror story.

One of the writers whom he admired greatly, probably because she wrote in his favorite form, was Emma Frances Dawson, whose stories "flow with a loitering current, and you may hear the sound of slow music and get glimpses of a darkened stage." He wrote that the appeal of her work lay in an adept use of the macabre, for her "stories

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[46]Bierce, "The Suitable Surroundings," The Collected Writings of Ambrose Bierce (New York, 1946), pp. 163-164. Since the North Texas State College Library collection of Bierce's Collected Works is incomplete and does not include his fiction, almost all footnote references to Bierce's short stories will be from this edition of his writings and will be indicated by the short title, Writings, the name of the story, and exact page numbers.

have . . . a good deal of the supernatural and very little of the natural."[47]

Dawson's stories especially impressed him with their descriptions of

> . . . a dream city--a city of wraiths and things forbidden to the senses--of half-heard whispers from tombs of men long dead and damned--of winds that sing dirges, clouds that are signs of portents, fogs peopled with fantastic existences pranking like mad, as is the habit of all sea-folk on shore leave--a city where the birds never sing, where children are unknown, and where at night the street-lights at the summits of the hills flare as if out of the sky, signaling mysterious messages from another world.[48]
>
> . . . . This sister to Hugo has breathed into gross material . . . so strange a soul that to him who has read her book [there is] a meaning that has never been attached to any word of human speech.[49]

Bierce's Analysis of the Literary Market

Bierce did not write horror stories for commercial value; in fact, he held the general reader in contempt "as a mere idler, who reads with a delinquent advertance, to pass the time."[50] He made it clear that he held the horror story in high esteem as an art form; he wrote such stories only to be artistic. Believing that the taste of the many was notoriously bad,[51] he referred "to the low kind of success that is called popularity, for which sons

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[47]Bierce, "Emma Frances Dawson," Works, X, 168.

[48]Ibid., pp. 169-170. [49]Ibid., p. 170.

[50]Ibid., p. 168.

[51]Bierce, "On Literary Criticism," Works, X, 27.

of the gods, with their bellies sticking to their backs, really do strive."[52]

Furthermore, he had no patience with those writers who deliberately addressed the multitude. He thought that popular writers, like their audience, had no conception of literature as an art. If the popular writer "pursued the vocation for which he is better fitted," Bierce sneered, "he would dump another kind of rubbish from another kind of cart--pull out the tailboard and let it go. The [immortal writers] have a different method."[53] In a serious poem Bierce presented the theory that the writing of literature was its own reward--the writer had a heaven-sent gift which it did not become him to set to a dollars-and-cents value.[54]

Since he felt that the best pieces of literature end tragically, Bierce had little respect for "happy-ending literature, considering it pablum for the populace."[55] He wrote that "the average mind, (for which editors purvey, and mostly possess), dislikes, or thinks it dislikes, any

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[52]Bierce, "Some Disadvantages of Genius," Works, X, 291.

[53]Bierce, "The Matter of Manner," Works, X, 161.

[54]Bierce, "To A Dejected Poet," Works, IV, 263.

[55]Letter from Bierce to Adolphe de Castro, cited in De Castro, p. 81.

literature that is not sunny."[56] He admitted that he knew how to write "a story of the 'happy ending' sort for magazine readers for whom literature is too good," but that he would not do it "so long as stealing is more honorable and interesting."[57]

There were a number of specific attributes which Bierce assigned to the popular reading public. Perhaps these attributes accounted for his own low opinion of the literary taste: the public was completely unaware of the technical and aesthetic problems of literature;[58] the popular audience would accept no innovations, their appreciation limited to the sentimental, the conventional, the tried and true;[59] the reading public had a tendency to confine an author's fame to the successful genre in which he attained his first success and with which they were familiar;[60] and even when the multitude did appreciate

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[56]Letter from Bierce to Ruth Robertson, March 20, 1913, cited in Letters, p. 192.

[57]Letter from Bierce to a magazine editor, identified simply as "Davis," October 12, 1904, cited in Letters, p. 102.

[58]Bierce, "The Author as an Opportunity," Works, X, 307, 310.

[59]Letter from Bierce to Adolphe de Castro, cited in De Castro, p. 281.

[60]Bierce, "Some Disadvantages of Genius," Works, X, 291-292.

a good writer they were apt to value him for his inferior work.[61]

The best and most durable judgment on the artistic value of literary works was not rendered by the popular audience or contemporary critics, Bierce believed, but by posterity, whose judgments were

> . . . so just and true that in their prediction consists the whole science of criticism. To anticipate the verdict of posterity--that is all the most daring critic aspires to do, and to do that he should strive to exclude the evidence that posterity will not hear. Posterity is a tribunal in which there will be no testimony for the prosecution except what is inseparable from the strongest testimony for the defence. It will consider no man's bad work, for none will be extant. Nay, it will not even attend to the palliating or aggravating circumstances of his life and surroundings, for these too will have been forgotten; if not lost from the records they will be whelmed under mountains of similar or more important matter--Pelion upon Ossa of accumulated "literary materials."[62]

And speaking of the best work in stories of horror, Bierce declared he would miss his guess

> . . . if it do not hold attention when Father Time has much that the world admires snugly tucked away in his wallet--"alms for oblivion." This is a guess only: I am not a believer in the doctrine that good literary work has some inherent quality compelling recognition, and conferring vitality. Good literary work, like anything else, endures if the conditions favor, perishes if they do not; so my guess, upon examination, dwindles to a hope compounded of rather more desire than expectation.[63]

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[61]Bierce, "Edwin Markham's Poems," Works, X, 143.

[62]Bierce, "Poetry and Verse," Works, X, 265-266.

[63]Bierce, "Emma Frances Dawson," Works, X, 167.

In summary it may be said that Bierce followed the Gothic tradition with some important modifications. He considered Poe the leading writer of the horror story and was directly influenced by many of his stories and literary theories. Bierce, as much as Poe, recognized fear as a basic human emotion and tried to elevate the horror story to a high literary position by emphasizing its artistic value and age-old appeal and fascination. Among his dicta on the horror story, he included the rules that a writer must use moderation in describing horrors and that one must read a horror story under the proper conditions in order to obtain the most powerful effect. Finally, instead of exploiting horror for commercial purposes, Bierce tried to perfect his narrative technique and to write stories that were truly artistic, stories that would be venerated by the "ultimate umpire," posterity.

CHAPTER V

BIERCE'S HORROR STORIES: TYPES AND TECHNIQUES

When Bierce's first collection of short stories, In the Midst of Life, appeared in 1891, a reviewer wrote in the Chicago Musical Leader that the book contained

> . . . the grimmest of subjects combined with psychologic analysis of the clearest; the method of realism, a style crystal-clear, [accompanied by] imaginative vision of the most searching and the most radiant. Death, in warfare and in the horrid guise of the supernatural, was painted over and over. Man's terror in the face of each death gave the artist the cue for his wonderful physical and psychologic microscopics. You could not pin this work down as realism, or as romance; it was the greatest human drama--the conflict between life and death--fused through genius. Not Zola in the endless pages of his "Debacle," not the great Tolstoi in the great "War and Peace," had ever painted war, horrid war, more faithfully than any of the war stories in this book. Not even De Maupassant had invented out of war's terrible truths more dramatically imagined plots. The very color and note of war itself are in these pages. There painted an artist who had seen the thing itself, and being a genius, had made of it art still greater.[1]

Though written in superlatives, Brown's review touches upon several important aspects of Bierce's fiction: his preoccupation with death; his astute understanding of human psychology; his use of grim, realistic details and violent contrast; his interest in sensational plot material.

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[1]Cowley Brown, The Chicago Musical Leader (1891), cited in "Another Attempt to Boost Bierce into Immortality," Current Opinion, LXV (September, 1918), 184-185.

Death plays a very important part in Bierce's fiction. The protagonist dies in all but two of his war stories, and his stories of civilians always involve death in one or more forms: bodies arising from the dead; ghosts stalking at night; vicious murders revenged through macabre means. Bierce, of course, knew death at first-hand from his bloody war experiences and the untimely deaths of his sons. Although he probably shared the average man's curiosity about the nature of death, he apparently had no overwhelming fear of it; he merely capitalized on his readers' dread. His actual views on death are perhaps voiced by the condemned spy in "Parker Adderson, Philosopher":

> [The general] drew a long, deep breath, shuddered, as one awakened from a dreadful dream, and exclaimed almost inaudibly: "Death is horrible!" . . .
>
> "It was horrible to our savage ancestors," said the spy, gravely, "because they had not enough intelligence to dissociate the idea of consciousness from the idea of the physical forms in which it is manifested--as an even lower order of intelligence, that of the monkey, for example, may be unable to imagine a house without inhabitants, and seeing a ruined hut fancies a suffering occupant. To us it is horrible because we have inherited the tendency to think it so, accounting for the notion by wild and fanciful theories of another world--as names of places give rise to legends explaining them and reasonless conduct to philosophies in justification. You can hang me, General, but there your power of evil ends; you cannot condemn me to heaven."[2]

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[2]Bierce, "Parker Adderson, Philosopher," Writings, p. 62.

Bierce's grasp of psychological states, both normal and abnormal, has enabled him to give horror a fresh and added impact. This use of psychology frequently involves an ironic twist, which rests primarily on a certain kind of relationship between plot and character. The reader usually feels fear coupled with a sudden, bitter realization that the emotion of fear is cruelly inappropriate or baseless.[3]

Bierce's use of ironical horror shows that he understood the psychological relationship between intellectual, emotional, and sensory factors in the human personality. In almost all of his stories a character's reaction to circumstances involves all three of these factors. The typical pattern is that the character has an intellectual awareness of a dangerous situation, one which he believes threatens his life or his honor. Then this knowledge arouses in him an emotion of fear which deepens to horror and frequently results in madness or shock. Always the emotional involvement results in specific physical reactions: a tremendous heightening and acceleration of sensory perceptions, shortening or constriction of the breath, excessive trembling, and other demonstrations accurately noted and described.[4] Bierce's fear-possessed

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[3]Mary E. Grenander, "Bierce's Turn of the Screw: Tales of Ironical Terror," Western Humanities Review, XI (Summer, 1957), 257-258.

[4]Ibid., p. 259.

characters often exhibit symptoms which are similar to those listed in Philip Lawrence Harriman's definition of fear:

> Fear is an intense emotional reaction characterized by attempts to withdraw from the situation which elicits it and by physiological alterations such as blanching, tremors, rapid heart beat, dryness of mouth, and the like. . . . Modern proponents of the "emergency theory" of emotion regard the condition [of fear] as an interval during which the individual (or organism) is being prepared to flee or to attack.[5]

The mental states leading up to the traumatic horror and shock are given a thorough and often ironic treatment. The point of impact in the typical story is the moment of realization of danger, loss, disaster--sometimes by the character, sometimes by the reader, sometimes by both. Frequently Bierce achieves the horror by having a character mistake a harmless situation for a harmful one, or vice versa, the reader being aware of the true situation from the start. Herein lies his characteristic irony, as pointed out by Mary Grenander.[6]

Many of Bierce's critics have commented that his style, detached, restrained, and free from excessive detail, helps his stories achieve their effect of horror. Eric Partridge believes that Bierce placed primary

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[5]Philip Lawrence Harriman, "Fear," The Encyclopedia Americana, XI (New York, 1959), 74.

[6]Grenander, "Bierce's Turn of the Screw: Tales of Ironical Terror," p. 260.

importance on the impression or the conviction that he wanted to "flow" from his stories; but he does not believe that Bierce's stress on "impression" hindered the three-dimensional quality of his stories. Rather, he says, Bierce often "allows us to view an action from several points of vantage."[7] He particularly praises Bierce's "delicate sense of the shades of meaning and of the strength of words."[8] His style and his attention to the use of exactly appropriate details are excellent, Partridge emphasizes, for

> . . . even in the description of the invisible and the unknown he is precise--he never leaves us in doubt as to his meaning. He makes a scene live before our eyes, persons vivid, complex movements clear. . . . In his descriptions he is economical--in his narratives vigorous as every detail tells in the one, so every incident counts in the other. Yet he could invest a lovely, haunting scene from Nature with that luminous poetry which lay at the back of his apparent austerities. . . .[9]

Bierce often produces horror or shock through the use of violent contrast, frequently ironic in nature. His characteristic use of violent contrast, however, is quite different from Poe's laborious piling up of details and impressions all pointing the same way. The effect of suddenness and violence is more natural and true to real life than that produced by Poe's method. The constant

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[7]Eric Partridge, "Ambrose Bierce," The London Mercury, XVI (October, 1927), 637.

[8]Ibid.

[9]Ibid.

repetition of an idea or impression often tends to dull the mind or accustom it to a situation or a sensation. What in the beginning may have been fear turns to apathy from too much attention. One of the most obvious characteristics of shock or terror or horror is its suddenness, unexpectedness, violence. Bierce was more fully aware, too, of the insidious nature of fear and shock. He believed and showed repeatedly that they rest upon the individual's sudden perception of his own illogicality. And he realized more fully than Poe that the result of excessive fear is often a state of shock or trauma. Bierce understood and portrayed the phenomena of discontinuous mental states more thoroughly than Poe. The horror of Poe is primarily, though not always, for children or for the mentality not developed much beyond the fourteen or fifteen year level--the average in the United States according to some authorities. This type of mind or stage of mental development cannot easily appreciate subtlety or irony; impressions have to be repeated to be made plain or effective. Bierce insists upon irony; he may, in fact, overdo it as a type of shock therapy.

It is very obvious, as has been pointed out, that Bierce sought and preferred sensational plots. C. Hartley Grattan maintains that since Bierce hated realism and saw no point in reproducing the flat tones of the ordinary,

"he found an interesting topic only in the impingement of the extraordinary or the unreal on the normal course of events."[10] Thus it was always the bizarre happening that provided his excuse for a story. "This fact," Grattan concludes, "cannot be too frequently emphasized. Failure to recognize it has made more than one . . . discussion of Bierce quite irrelevant."[11]

Preoccupation with death; psychology of fear; grim, realistic, carefully selected details; violent, ironic contrast; and sensational plot material--these aspects of Bierce's fiction will be considered in relation to his best known stories, which for purposes of discussion have been classified generally as fables, war stories, stories of strange but explicable phenomena, stories of the supernatural, and stories of humor and horror.[12] The stories

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[10]Grattan, p. 122. [11]Ibid., p. 145.

[12]Bierce also revised and rewrote Adolphe Danziger's translation of Richard Voss's medieval romance, The Monk and the Hangman's Daughter in 1892. Frank Monaghan read the original Voss manuscript in German to ascertain the specific changes, if any, that Bierce made in the story. He found that Bierce's contributions to the original story were not many: deletions of unnecessary material; amplifications of more important situations; a clear, readable style; and a single ironical change in the ending of the story. In "Ambrose Bierce and the Authorship of The Monk and the Hangman's Daughter," American Literature, IV (January, 1931), 348, Monaghan stated that "the surprise ending . . . had long been a favorite one with Bierce, so this was probably his only major contribution to the story. . . ."

Since The Monk and the Hangman's Daughter is a translation and does not fully represent Bierce's work, no analysis will be made of it in this chapter.

chosen for analysis will exemplify particular devices and effects for procuring horror.

The Fables

Bierce's Fantastic Fables exhibit some of the characteristics of his longer stories; above all, they have an unmistakably grotesque quality. The approximately 200 fables of this collection are sharp comments on some of the current topics of Bierce's day. Clifton Fadiman has commented that the theme of the fables "is always the same: mankind is a scoundrel."[13] Moreover, the fables are seldom longer than thirty lines, a quality which enhances "their ferocious concentration of extra-double-distilled essential oil of misanthropy."[14]

The titles of the fables themselves are often macabre: "The Ashes of Madame Blavatsky," "The Catted Anarchist," "The Witch's Steed," "The Tail of the Sphinx," and "The Unshrewd Assassin." These little tales also possess a weird kind of humor and are simply written. Rather ludicrous and "fantastic" names are sometimes used for people and places. Two characters in "The Bumbo of Jiam" are called the Pahdour of Patagascar and the Gookhul of Madagonia. As in Aesop, animals are often the characters and speak cryptic lines.

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[13] Fadiman, p. 12. [14] Ibid.

The most grotesque and typically Biercian quality of the fables, however, is their consistent use of an ironic climax. "The Cat and the King" illustrates well the vitriolic flavor of the fables and Bierce's method of ending them with an abrupt, grim twist:

> A cat was looking at a King, as permitted by the proverb.
> "Well," said the Monarch, observing her inspection of the royal person, "how do you like me?"
> "I can imagine a King," said the Cat, "whom I should like better."
> "For example?"
> "The King of Mice."
> The sovereign was so pleased with the wit of the reply that he gave her permission to scratch his Prime Minister's eyes out.[15]

Bierce's fables share these two above-mentioned qualities with his longer works of fiction: an ironic, matter-of-fact style in which horrible details are handled coolly and unemotionally, and the use of abrupt and unexpected conclusions. These little bits of cynicism might properly have been included in the category styled stories of humor and horror.

The War Stories

Bierce's most famous anthology is probably Tales of Soldiers, which includes such well-known stories as "The Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," "Chickamauga," and "A Horseman in the Sky."

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[15]Bierce, Writings, p. 557.

The plot situations in these three stories indicate Bierce's penchant for sensational material: a condemned spy imagines a dream-sequence escape in the moment between the drop of the hangman's trap and the fall which will end his life; an uncomprehending deaf-mute child wanders gleefully over a bloody battlefield; a soldier on one side in the Civil War knowingly shoots down his father, who is serving on the other.

Bierce had the peculiar power to make these and other unusual happenings seem as vivid and real as the most true-to-life stories recorded by professed realists. His extraordinary events nearly always arise out of ordinary or routine experiences in such a logical way as not to distort the over-all impression of reality. Even though war itself is a departure from the ordinary, the outstanding merit of Bierce's picture of war is its extraordinary reality.[16]

In "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" the physical sensations of the imaginary escape are very carefully and cleverly coordinated with the physical sensations of the execution, so that verisimilitude is scrupulously observed. During the first few seconds after he fell from the bridge, Peyton Farquhar was conscious; he was acutely aware of the horrible ache in his neck, the fire

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[16]Grattan, p. 122.

in his brain, the leaping of the heart, the insupportable anguish of his whole body--physical reactions of an organism being cut off from the breath of life.

His mind refused to accept the situation; he entered a state of traumatic shock. The seconds seemed like hours; shock had caused a malfunction of the time sense. And yet some of his perception was preternaturally keen and alert; a detached segment of his brain was fulfilling the plan of escape he had devised in the few brief seconds before the crosstie was pulled from under him. He observed carefully the minute, irrelevant details of the trees, the water, the insects upon the stream. No noise, however slight, escaped his ears. He imagined that he was traveling on a road which terminated on the horizon and that overhead shone great golden stars. This journey might symbolize the soul's flight or progress into eternity.

At one point in his swift escape from the enormity of death, Farquhar seemed aware of his physical condition. He thrust out his tongue to relieve the thirst in his throat. At that moment the pull of the rope had in reality almost done its work. Suddenly Farquhar thought he stood at the gates of his own home, which perhaps represented the gates of heaven. He saw his wife and was almost within her arms when he felt a stunning blow at the

back of his neck, a blinding white light shone about him "with a sound like the shock of a cannon," and all was "darkness and silence."[17] Farquhar's soul had reached heaven when the rope finally broke his neck and cut off all consciousness of the world.

Bierce thoroughly involves the reader in the excitement of his protagonist's escape--an action related in such vivid detail that tremendous shock is imparted in the final line. There the reader learns that the escape has all been in the protagonist's imagination, an imagination made preternaturally active by the approaching death which there was only one way to avoid. Bierce makes no direct statement about hope springing eternal in the human breast; he rather makes the reader feel vividly this hope, its necessity, and above all its absurdity, its baselessness. His seduction of the reader is not a cheap trick, as some have observed,[18] because that is the real point of the story: men are all always and forever victims of their vainglorious, baseless hopes as much as they are of their fears. The horror in this famous tale derives partially from the reader's sudden but contemplative insight

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[17]Bierce, "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," Writings, pp. 17-18.

[18]Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, editors, The Scope of Fiction (New York, 1960), pp. 102-103.

into his own infatuation. The reader, says Bierce, without using words, is as easily self-duped as Peyton Farquhar. A quaint and bitter aftertaste lingers about this story, an effect more powerful than that created by the cleverness of detail or the symbolism in his arrival at home. If, as Brooks and Warren imply, this story is a mere clinical report, the perceptive reader may find it nevertheless a satisfactorily disturbing comment upon the vanity of human wishes.

"Chickamauga" is one of Bierce's most horrible and bitter statements on the depravity and malevolence of the universe. In this story horror is piled upon horror to make the already gloomy atmosphere frighteningly dismal and hopeless. Such Gothic devices as an eerie forest setting and words and phrases suggesting the supernatural--"haunted landscape" and "thin, ghostly mist"--are juxtaposed with grimly realistic descriptions of human pain and suffering.

Symbolism, violent contrast, and reversal of roles create further horror in the reader. The gloom and darkness of the forest suggest the dismal, morose condition of the world and of the human mind. The protagonist, a deaf-mute child, is a symbol of the individual muted and maimed by nature, cut off from communication; the soldiers represent humanity maimed and muted by the cruelty of conflict

and war. As the uncomprehending child awoke in the forest, he saw bloody, ragged men stumbling onward. He mistook them for gaily-spattered clowns, and laughed at them. The soldiers were likewise "heedless of the dramatic contrast between his laughter and their own ghastly gravity."[19] Carrying his wooden sword, the child placed himself at the head of the column of wounded; thus a child becomes the leader of men, a gruesomely ironic comment on "And a little child shall lead them."

This odd detail of wounded moved slowly toward a red illumination at the edge of the forest, a kind of "guiding light--a pillar of fire to this strange exodus."[20] But the light was not a heavenly one; it was the burning home of the child, set afire in the recent battle. The child discovered the torn body of his mother in front of the blazing plantation, which could be said to represent the fires of hell itself. At this point Bierce describes the child as a strange creature who made "wild, uncertain gestures" and uttered "inarticulate and indescribable cries--something between the chattering of an ape and the gobbling of a turkey--a startling, soulless, unholy sound, the language of a devil."[21] The transformation of an innocent child into a raging devil is a ferocious comment

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[19]Bierce, "Chickamauga," Writings, p. 21.

[20]Ibid., p. 23. [21]Ibid.

upon the brutality of war--one of the first of its kind in literary history. "Chickamauga" represents Bierce's final turn of the screw in driving home the depravity of man and God--or whatever other sadistic forces controlled Bierce's universe.

Though some readers may find the piling up of horrors too lacking in artistic restraint, too nearly hysterical in wanton cruelty to be believable, this famous story with its "red fires" and "weird shadows" has a strange vitality. It is a prose poem on war not easily forgotten.

If the atmosphere of "Chickamauga" is violent, ugly, gloomy, that of "A Horseman in the Sky" is serene and suggests the harmony and stability of home and loved ones. No ugly, realistic details batter the reader; instead, a certain vague misgiving, akin to horror, is stirred up by the violent contrast between the beautiful, peaceful valley and the terrible act which takes place there. The incongruity heightens the conflict and points up the theme of the story: the tragic disharmony between love and duty.

Carter Druse was involved in such a situation. At the start of the Civil War, he left his home in Virginia to join the Union Army. His father, a devoted Southerner, unsuccessfully opposed his plans; the elder Druse's

parting words were stern: "Well, go, sir, and whatever may occur, do what you conceive to be your duty."[22]

Many months later young Druse was posted on a high cliff overlooking the valley where his regiment was camping. He saw a tall, dignified, silver-haired Confederate soldier ride up on horseback; he was awed by the soldier's handsome, statuesque physique. When he saw the soldier's face, Druse was spellbound; he trembled and turned pale. Then he became tranquil; he hoped that the horseman would ride away without having seen the Union regiment in the valley. Druse stared into the valley and observed that the regiment was in plain sight. Remembering his father's stern parting words, he raised his gun and shot the rebel's horse; the horse and its magnificent rider whipped over the cliff and floated downward hundreds of feet into the trees in the valley.

All the while Druse's senses were clear. He was able to respond quickly. Though in a state of semi-shock, he was able to act and think logically. He observed every detail of the landscape; he heard every sound. The horror of what he had had to do was so vast, so great, so sudden, that his mind was slow to seize upon the whole of it. He could only take in rationally a small portion of the experience itself, the details of the setting.

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[22]Bierce, "A Horseman in the Sky," Writings, p. 5.

Druse remained in this state of semi-shock until he was forced to tell his commanding officer that he had shot his own father. Only that moment was he able to admit to himself that he had done it. Bierce was being psychologically true in delaying the identity of the father until the last line.

Bierce's horror often depends for its effect on the exaggeration of a normal emotion--such as family affection in "A Horseman in the Sky."[23] When examined in the light of psychological motivation, however, his character's exaggerated feelings and actions are valid.

The main incident of "A Horseman in the Sky" is an example also of Bierce's use of coincidence, but here coincidence is acceptable and credible. Bierce may have carried the irony too far, however, in having Druse remember his father's exact parting words. Or it may have been the necessary method of saying that war has an insidious way of putting high ideals and admirable sentiments to the acid test.

Stories of Strange but Explicable Phenomena

Besides war stories, fables, and stories of humor and horror, Bierce's stories can be divided into two rather broad groups: stories which can be explained rationally

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[23]Joseph Wood Krutch, Edgar Allen Poe (New York, 1926), p. 205.

and stories of the supernatural, which cannot be explained rationally. All eleven stories of Tales of Civilians belong in the first group; whereas most of the better stories of Can Such Things Be? belong in the second group.

Two stories of Tales of Civilians particularly deserve attention: "The Man and the Snake," an interesting psychological study, and "The Boarded Window," one of Bierce's briefest pieces of sheer horror.

In "The Man and the Snake" Bierce explores the treacherous quality of approaching madness. The steps leading toward the protagonist's loss of reason are presented so gradually and logically that the reader is hardly aware that Harker Brayton has become the victim of his own pride and superstitious fear. He is carefully characterized as a logical, intelligent young man who was not ordinarily ruled by his fears and emotions. He was not at first greatly surprised when he saw a serpent malignantly staring at him from under the bed in his apartment. He remembered but quickly discounted the superstition that the eye of a serpent has hypnotic power. He calmly weighed the facts of the situation and concluded that it would be best to leave the room quietly so as not to disturb the serpent. To his surprise, his limbs would not move. He was not afraid, but he trembled and broke out in a cold sweat. Then gradually his latent fear began

to manifest itself. His eyes were irresistibly drawn to the strange stare of the serpent. He at length swooned under the weight of great, inexplicable emotion; in his dream he felt that he had been hypnotized in a strange land where a serpent ruled--a symbol of the very fear that had possessed his mind and body. He fell to the floor, revived, and found himself even more greatly subverted by the serpent's stare. So great was the effect of the hallucination upon his nervous system that he assumed the characteristics of a snake: he lay on his stomach, swished his legs backward and forward like the tail of a snake, and hissed softly. Eventually he died in a cataleptic trance. Delayed evidence, however, provides an extra, unexpected jolt of horror. Bierce carries the age-old device of reversal one step beyond expectation. The snake was not real; its hypnotic eyes were shoe buttons. What a strange unpredictable instrument the human mind can be!

Thus the horror in this story is partially derived from the reader's recognition of his own possible weaknesses in those of Harker Brayton. Here was a normal, reasonable man who did not believe in old wives' tales about snakes' eyes and who was apparently even amused to be lodged near a snakery. He was going about routine tasks in a routine, sensible manner. The very casual

logicality of the madness which finally took him makes it difficult for the reader to say where sanity left off and insanity began. The story gains much of its horror from the skillful retailing of this psychological process.

"The Boarded Window," like many of Bierce's tales, makes no moral comment on the nature of human existence except to point up the strangeness. It is, however, one of Bierce's best pieces of calculated horror, achieved again through the use of violent contrast, climactic order of action, reversal of situation, and surprise or shock.

The story begins with a date and bit of history to impart plausibility. The setting, a quiet frontier forest, contrasts effectively with the awesome events.

Although the story is repeated second-hand, it is vividly told. A man named Murlock lived in a forsaken, tumble-down cabin, which had a single door and, directly opposite, a window. The narrator reports that the window had been boarded up. "Nobody could remember a time when it was not. And none knew why it was closed."[24] Suspense is aroused by the statement that few living persons ever knew the story of the window. "But I am one," the narrator says, "as you shall see."[25] The supernatural is

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[24]Bierce, "The Boarded Window," Writings, p. 169.

[25]Ibid.

suggested by the remark that Murlock died in his cabin from causes that could not be determined.

The final section of the story is the narrator's grandfather's account of "an earlier chapter." Here the elements of horror are arranged in a climactic order. Murlock's wife became ill with a fever and died before a distant neighbor could bring help. The grief-stricken husband prepared his wife for burial. His humble, loving, heartbroken sorrow, perfectly natural, contrasts sharply with the savage events which occurred after he fell asleep near his wife's body.

He awoke to hear strange noises in the dark room; as a result of extreme fear he seemed to suffer an acute discontinuity between the responses of his body and the activities of his mind. Though his intelligence bade him investigate the terrible noise, his body would not move. "There is a point at which terror may turn to madness; and madness incites to action,"[26] Bierce comments. Murlock, seemingly freed from paralysis by an overabundance of emotion, grabbed his rifle from the wall and discharged it into the darkness. In the shot's vivid illumination, he saw a "black panther dragging the dead woman toward the window, its teeth fixed in her throat."[27]

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[26] Ibid., p. 172.

[27] Ibid.

Murlock and his wife, who was in a cataleptic trance, literally seemed to exchange conditions for a few brief seconds. He became completely paralyzed as though dead, and she revived. Though the reader is sufficiently harrowed by the wife's death and the panther's attack on the corpse, he is given an extra fillip by the delayed evidence that she was not dead at all--"the ribbon with which he [Murlock] had bound the wrists was broken; the hands were tightly clenched. Between the teeth was a fragment of the animal's ear."[28]

As in "The Man and the Snake," an old superstition supplies a basis for horror: cats are attracted by dead bodies. This phenomenon, like that of a body rising from the dead, is Poesque in its ghastliness. But "The Boarded Window," which may be compared with "The Fall of the House of Usher," creates a more realistic and effective, if less dramatic, kind of horror than Poe's famous tale; and perhaps its greater success in this purpose is due to the realistic, normal surroundings in which the weird event took place. The real horror is that the supposedly dead woman reverted to an animal herself and bit a chunk out of the panther's ear in her panic. No other detail could make more vivid her mortal fright or point up the animal quality in fear itself.

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[28] *Ibid.*

Stories of the Supernatural[29]

When the title of Bierce's first collection of short stories, *In the Midst of Life*, is combined with the title of his second short story collection, *Can Such Things Be?*, the result is a question that implies both skepticism and credulity: *In the Midst of Life Can Such Things Be?* If Bierce himself were to answer this question concerning his views on supernatural phenomena, he might answer in the following manner, "I hardly believe these things, yet there are actual reports made by veracious witnesses."[30]

Like most persons of a skeptical mind, Bierce was fascinated by the unusual and apparently inexplicable phenomena reported but not scientifically accountable. Occasionally, as in the *Tales of Civilians*, he would plan a story so that alongside the supernatural would run a rational explanation of the happening. More frequently, as in twenty stories of *Can Such Things Be?*, he offered no explanation.[31] His attitude may be summed up in his

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[29]The term *supernatural* as used in this chapter means specifically an order of existence outside the normal experience or knowledge of man. Thus a supernatural phenomenon is one which is caused by other than the known forces of nature; since such a phenomenon is rationally inexplicable, it is to be distinguished from an explicable phenomenon, which can be explained rationally, such as catalepsy.

[30]Grattan, p. 152.

[31]*Ibid*.

definition of a ghost: "The outward and visible sign of an inward fear."[32]

Believing that fear played a large part in psychic life, Bierce was interested in ghosts as popular and yet bizarre manifestations of this fundamental human characteristic. By this very fact his stories of the supernatural gain in vividness and power.[33]

Three writers--Walter Neale, C. Hartley Grattan, and Eric Partridge--consider "The Death of Halpin Frayser" Bierce's best story of the supernatural. However, these writers minimize the many supernatural elements and dwell instead on the extraordinary utilization of the Oedipus complex and blood as a sexual symbol.[34]

Though the story is rich with Gothic devices--gloomy atmosphere, an old forgotten cemetery, demoniac laughs in the darkness--its adept foreshadowing, flashback technique and symbolism give it a distinctly modern flavor. The romantic attachment between Frayser and his beautiful mother is revealed subtly and cautiously; its full power and horror are made known during Frayser's macabre dream of pools of blood and unexpiated sin, symbols of the incestuous relationship.

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[32]Ambrose Bierce, The Devil's Dictionary in The Collected Writings of Ambrose Bierce, p. 248.

[33]Grattan, p. 153.

[34]Neale, p. 184; Grattan, p. 170; Partridge, p. 631.

At the time of his weird dream, Frayser was lying in darkness in the hills above St. Helena, California, where he had gone hunting. Having recently returned from a long voyage, he had not seen nor heard from his mother for many years. He subconsciously felt that he had neglected her. When her spirit, clad in the raiments of the grave, rose up before him, he was disturbed to find that her eyes no longer expressed the love she had once felt for him. In describing this scene Bierce took advantage of an old superstitious speculation that a person who was affectionate in life may return as a malevolent spirit after death. Extreme shock jolts the reader as he learns that the strange specter clutched Frayser's throat and strangled him, amid bursts of "soulless" and "malign" laughter.

Until the third section of the story the reader has been given no rational explanation for the unusual occurrences in the first two sections. Two deputies were in the hills searching for an escaped madman who had recently cut the throat of his wife, a widow whom he had married and murdered after she came west from Tennessee looking for her son. The wife was buried in a forsaken cemetery in the hills, and the madman often frequented her grave. Arriving at the cemetery, the deputies found the strangled

body of Frayser. The murdered woman was his mother, and he was lying on her grave.

The climactic scene is one of the most chilling in all of Bierce's fiction:

> There came to [the deputies] out of the fog--seemingly from a great distance--the sound of a laugh, a low, deliberate, soulless laugh . . . ; a laugh that rose by slow gradation, louder and louder, clearer, more distinct, and terrible . . . , a laugh so unnatural, so unhuman, so devilish, that it filled those hardy man-hunters with a sense of dread unspeakable! They did not move their weapons nor think of them; the menace of that horrible sound was not of the kind to be met with arms. As it had grown out of silence, so now it died away. . . .[35]

The horror of this weird tale lies not so much in its macabre climax or in its Gothic trappings as in the agonizing torture which Frayser suffered for his sin of incest. In his dream he was haunted by feelings and symbols of guilt; he dreamed that he would confess all by recording on paper his guilt as an appeal to the "powers that are not malignant." After he confessed his sin and expressed a hope for forgiveness, he lost his life in expiation for his sin. Thus Halpin Frayser was redeemed, though he was only half conscious. "The Death of Halpin Frayser" is, then, something more than a "shocker"; it makes a statement on the strange psychological effects of a terrible unconfessed sin and on nature's bizarre methods

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[35]Bierce, "The Death of Halpin Frayser," Writings, pp. 408-409.

of exacting penance and punishment. The rampant, evil forces in life which often weaken even the bravest and most virtuous are symbolized in the "unhuman" and "devilish" laugh which petrified the deputies.

Stories of Humor and Horror

The one remaining category cited for Bierce's fiction is that of a combination of the horrible and the ludicrous. Bierce believed that the one heightened the other. His stories of humor and horror have drawn praise from several critics. Walter Jerrold remarked that Bierce is "ever presenting something essentially horrible and grim in an atmosphere of fun which kills the horrible itself. His tragedy is carried to height of the ludicrous. . . ."[36] Clifton Fadiman was particularly impressed by this aspect of Bierce's art. He wrote:

> Bierce's morbidity was exceptionally fertile--he made it produce humor as well as chills. I should say that in this extremely narrow field of the sardonic, of the ludicrous ghost story, and the comical murder, he is unrivaled. He begins by making you accept the basic premise: death is a joke. The rest is deadpan elaboration, with the deadpan occasionally relieved by the rictus of a ghoul trying to laugh.[37]

In Bierce's stories of humor and horror the protagonist is always fantastically callous and insensitive, and

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[36]Walter Jerrold, "The Identity of Dod Grile," Bookman, LX (June, 1921), 133.

[37]Fadiman, p. 61.

the events represented are nearly always implausibly exaggerated. His stories of humor and horror are found in the Collected Works under the titles of The Parenticide Club and Negligible Tales and fall into two categories: stories with rational explanations, such as "My Favorite Murder," "Oil of Dog," and "The Curried Cow"; and stories actually based on supernatural phenomena, such as "A Revolt of the Gods."

"My Favorite Murder" provides an excellent example of this ludicrous horror. The story is told by the nephew who relates how he weakened his uncle by cutting his tendo Achillis veins and rendering him powerless. The ingenious nephew then tied the uncle up in a burlap bag and hung the bag from the limb of a tree near a vicious ram that soon pounded him to death.

The narrator coolly states at the start of the story that he has previously slain his own mother "under circumstances of singular atrocity."[38] Staggering under this initial blow, the reader reels through the rest of the story not quite knowing what to expect next or how to feel about it, since the author gives no indication. The enormity and exaggeration finally make him see that his leg is being pulled and he may manage at first a weak smile, then a chuckle.

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[38]Bierce, "My Favorite Murder," Writings, p. 793.

Fadiman is convinced that "My Favorite Murder" is a masterpiece. He says that the story "really creates a new shudder . . . in which laughter is grotesquely mingled. It is outrageous, it is frightening, it is funny. One finishes it in thorough agreement with the narrator that 'in point of artistic atrocity' the murder of Uncle William has seldom been excelled."[39] Vincent Starrett is of somewhat the same opinion: "In 'My Favorite Murder,' one of the best tales that Bierce ever wrote, there is a satirical whimsicality and a cynical brutality that make the tale an authentic masterpiece of something--perhaps humor."[40] Mary Grenander, however, is of a different opinion. She feels that the horrible and ludicrous factors in the story cancel each other.[41]

In summary, Bierce's stories, including those of humor and horror, exhibit these characteristics: ironical, unexpected climaxes; grim, realistic details, and sensational plots. Only his stories of war and a few of his stories of the supernatural, however, demonstrate fully the abilities which have brought him enduring fame. "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" provides a penetrating

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[39]Fadiman, p. 61.

[40]Vincent Starrett, Buried Caesars (Chicago, 1923), pp. 55-56.

[41]Grenander, "The Critical Theories of Ambrose Bierce," pp. 83-84.

analysis of the discontinuous mental, emotional, and moral states caused by extreme fear or shock. "The Man and the Snake" is a dramatic study of the insidious quality of madness or fixation arising out of the ordinary thought process. Violent contrast between the beautiful and the peaceful and the grim and the horrible adds power to "A Horseman in the Sky" and "The Boarded Window"; the establishment of a horrifying atmosphere drives home the brutality and meaninglessness of war in "Chickamauga."

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Ambrose Bierce was the first writer to insist that the horror story is a high art form. When a New York critic remarked that his stories were written merely to frighten and shock, Bierce replied:

> I wrote my tales of horror without reference to nerves, or even the existence of the innocent, and in the belief that they are good and true art [italics mine]--a belief in which I have the obstinacy to remain.[1]

He proved so obstinate that he evolved his own type of short story: brilliant, ironic, climactic.[2] Frank Monaghan notes that Bierce's situations are "often unusual and abnormal, with cruel and ironic motifs"; his tales are among "the most brilliant, terrifying, and hauntingly suggestive in our literature."[3] Bierce's "whiplash" endings antedated O. Henry, George Snell observes, and, unlike the typical O. Henry story, "a Bierce story can be re-read with profit, for there is real evidence of a technician's hand."[4]

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[1]Ambrose Bierce, The San Francisco Examiner (January 22, 1893), cited in McWilliams, p. 214.

[2]Frank Monaghan, "Ambrose Bierce," The Dictionary of American Biography, II (New York, 1929), 253.

[3]Ibid.

[4]Snell, p. 51.

The grim, realistic nature of Bierce's stories has long drawn the attention of critics and readers alike. Van Wyck Brooks writes that Bierce "had much of the power that Dostoievsky signalized, the power of making even the nearly impossible seem natural and true."[5] Frederic Taber Cooper, also impressed with Bierce's evocative power, feels that "one cannot escape from the strange, haunting power of his tales, the grim, boding sense of their having happened--even the most weird, most supernatural, most grotesquely impossible of them, in precisely the way he has told them."[6]

Samuel Loveman comments more specifically on Bierce's contribution to the technique of the horror story. "In Bierce," he says, "the evocation of horror becomes, for the first time, not so much the prescription or perversion of Poe and Maupassant, but an atmosphere, definite, realistic, and precise."[7] Bierce's words, so simple "that one would be prone to ascribe them to the limitations of a literary hack," take on "an unholy terror, a new and unguessed transformation."[8] In Poe, Loveman observes,

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[5]Van Wyck Brooks, The Confident Years: 1885-1915 (New York, 1952), p. 207.

[6]Cooper, p. 346.

[7]Samuel Loveman, "A Note," in Ambrose Bierce, Twenty-One Letters of Ambrose Bierce (Cleveland, 1922), p. 4.

[8]Ibid.

horror was a tour de force, in Maupassant a nervous engagement of flagellated climax. But "to Bierce, simply and sincerely, horror held in its tormented depth a legitimate and reliant means to an end."[9]

The one single aspect of Bierce's fiction that clearly aligns him with writers of the twentieth century is his astute use of psychology. With a power few writers before him possessed, he was able to enter into the realm of mental and emotional experience to describe the fearful states of his character's minds. Grattan mentions Bierce's "accurate psychology";[10] Boynton dwells on a discussion of his "disturbing psychological analysis."[11] Yet Bierce's stories are much more than mere clinical analyses; they make definite comments on life; they have a valid meaning and significance. Upon analysis, his stories show signs of conscious craftsmanship and artistic skill.

Bierce as a writer of short stories is, of course, not perfect. He has several obvious faults: he is too clever at times; he perhaps overdoes his ironic twists; he is too consistently cynical and bitter to be entirely credible; he sometimes piles up horrors inartistically. He depends perhaps too much upon the bizarre, the sensational. The most important single limitation to his art

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[9] Ibid.

[10] Grattan, p. 145.

[11] Boynton, p. 78.

of the horrible, however, is that he never grasped the idea that there can be a kind of horror in the quiet, even the routine--that the daily, ordinary pursuits and relationships of men are, unfortunately, sometimes fraught with this regrettable burden.

With his more shocking and less subtle horror, Bierce was, nevertheless, the forerunner of such writers as Katharine Ann Porter, William Faulkner, Stephen Crane, Ernest Hemingway, and Conrad Aiken, who all have made horror and violence part of their fictional repertoire.

Bierce was also one of the first American writers to take a thoroughly unromantic view of war. He had fought and been wounded in the Civil War; he had seen death and destruction first-hand. He knew there was nothing very glorious about war. Four years before Stephen Crane's realistic but second-hand account of war, The Red Badge of Courage, Bierce published In the Midst of Life, stories based on some of his own actual war experiences.

Bierce never had much interest in the political issues of war; a soldier seldom does. He considered war simply as an instrument of national policy much more violent and destructive than those acts resorted to in a political campaign but of no greater significance fundamentally. He also knew that the truly vindictive animosity was behind the battle lines; he emphasized the

fact that a soldier is not a defender of ideals but an enforced, impenitent man-killer. He recognized the difference between the pageantry of war which appeals to the civilian and its deadly actuality which bears down upon the soldier.[12] To intensify his effects, Bierce often contrasted the beautiful and the peaceful with the horrible and the brutal. This method Ernest Hemingway used later in such novels of violence and death as A Farewell to Arms and For Whom the Bell Tolls. Bierce, of course, always wrote from the standpoint of the individual sufferer in war and never attempted to glorify any aspect of killing.

Bierce's whole life was shaped by his experiences in the Civil War, and, perhaps more specifically, by the scalp wound which he received at Kennesaw Mountain. To him this wound became a symbol of impersonal misfortune impersonally caused; it was a traumatic shock and had lasting psychic effects. Frederick J. Hoffman points out that Hemingway suffered such a wound--physical and symbolical--during World War I.[13] The effect of the wound on

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[12]Grattan, pp. 138-140.

[13]Frederick J. Hoffman, "No Beginning and No End: Hemingway and Death," in Interpretations of American Literature, edited by Charles Feidelson, Jr., and Paul Brodtkorb, Jr. (New York, 1959), p. 322.

both Bierce and Hemingway was that they lost faith in society, religion, and government.

It was not the physical pain which caused these men to alter radically their outlooks on life; it was the impersonality, the unreasonableness, the lack of logic or motivation or meaning behind the infliction of the wound. Since a deep injury to the body usually results in a comparably severe injury to the psychic nature, the injured man cannot rest until he has found what is to him a meaningful and original pattern of adjustment.[14] The literary works of Hemingway and Bierce reflect the success--or lack of success--of each in finding a new and meaningful pattern of adjustment. Hemingway's heroes search for, and sometimes seem to find, like Robert Jordan in _For Whom the Bell Tolls_, a meaning and purpose for the violence in life.[15] Bierce's heroes, however, are always caught up by life's horror and conflicts and are destroyed. Bierce was never able to adjust to the circumstances of his inner wound. He could never understand nor forgive the violence, the brutality, the meaninglessness of life. But by holding up to the public gaze something like the true countenance of war, he helped to prepare the way for

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[14] _Ibid._, p. 323.

[15] _Ibid._, p. 330.

later--and better--realistic writers of war[16]--Crane and Hemingway.

Man in the twentieth century is particularly subject to the kind of sudden, violent, unmotivated death and injury for which Bierce could find no reasonable explanation in his day. The sudden, unexpected wounds and destruction caused by swift-moving airplanes, automobiles, and other mechanical devices in peacetime and by guns and bombs in wartime are all parameters of the unreasonable wound and of the death-in-life which is its consequence. If there is any therapeutic value in the fiction of Bierce, it is to prepare his readers for an age in which horror threatens to run rampant, unchecked, and unmotivated.

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[16]Fadiman, p. 12.

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