

## UNIT 5

### AMBROSE BIERCE (1842-1914?)

#### *AN OCCURRENCE AT OWL CREEK, THE MAN AND THE SNAKE & OIL OF A DOG*

### I. INTRODUCTION: BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Ambrose Gwinnett Bierce was born on June 24, 1842, in Meigs County, Ohio, the last of nine children of strongly religious parents. He led an unhappy childhood, and as an adult he cut himself off from his parents and all but one of his brothers and sisters. Born in a log cabin, he defied Alger's Law and did not become President. His father was a poor, eccentric farmer who begot nine children, Ambrose being the youngest, one evidence of the by no means fanciful theory that exceptional persons are often the last, or among the later, of a long series of progeny. Ambrose seems to have hated his whole family except for his brother Albert. The unlovely circumstances of his early life may be in part the source of Bierce's later addiction to aristocratic heroes. A by no means accidentally large number of his horrifying humorous tales turn on parricide and, less often matricide, with an occasional avuculicide(de tío) (e.g. "An Imperfect Conflagration").

To declare that Bierce's works are but a kind of inky revenge on his father is cheap, easy, and false; yet it does not require a Freud to trace his fierce assault on all form of authority some evidence of a clouded childhood. Perhaps his fascination with the supernatural in his fiction is similarly an attempt to escape the ordinary society of men he observed closely and claimed to detest. In any case, from his earliest days 'Bitter Bierce', as he came to be

called, seemed disappointed with what had been, displeased with his present condition, and pessimistic about what lay ahead.

The fact that Bierce wrote like an educated man is hardly explained by his education. When he was seventeen he spent a year in the Kentucky Military Institute. Not long afterward the Civil War broke out and he enlisted as a volunteer with the Union Army. He began as a drummer-boy and emerged from the war a lieutenant; it is evident that he possessed the 'qualities of leadership'. This was directly responsible for some of his most finely felt, least posed(*afectadas*) stories. It may have been the spring of a certain military quality in him, for he writes like a conquistador, quick to take offense and to require insult. Bierce later defined war (in his *Devil's Dictionary*) as a 'by-product of the arts of peace', and peace as 'a period of cheating between two periods of fighting', and it is hard to believe that, even while a soldier, he had been a zealous(*fanático*) military man. The Civil War experience, however, was an important source of some of his best fiction, including the spare and shocking "Chickamauga" and "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge".

Shortly after the end of the war Bierce removed to San Francisco, the city that was to remain the focal point of his career. His first job was that of night-watchman at the Sub-treasury Building. He seems to have been involved in local politics and to have employed his talents as a controversial cartoonist, directing his ire, with characteristic impartiality, against both factions. But now journalism rose to mark him and in her dubious service he was to continue for many a year. From 1866 to 1872 he contributed various splinters(*trazos*) of hackwork(*trabajo rutinario*) to the *Argonaut* and the *News Letter*, of which he finally became editor. Among his writer friends in San Francisco were Mark Twain, Bret Harte, Joaquin Miller, and George Sterling,

all of whom were involved as journalists, lecturers, and writers in establishing San Francisco as a literary center.

In 1871 he married Mary Ellen Day, the daughter of a '49-er. The years from 1872 to 1876 were spent in London where he engaged in the peculiar slashing(fulminante) journalism that had already won for him the sobriquet (apodo, mote) 'Bitter Bierce'. There, under the influence of literary sophisticates such as George Augustus Sala and Thomas Hood, he developed from a crude western humorist into a satirist of elegance and bite (mordacidad, penetración).

In 1876, his health having failed, moved back to San Francisco. His best early work appeared in the 'Prattler'(charlatán) column written first for the *Argonaut* (1877-79), and then for the *Wasp* until 1886. In that year the popular column was picked up by William Randolph Hearst's *San Francisco Sunday Examiner*, where it continued until 1896.

A mixture of reviews, gossip, political and social commentary, the 'Prattler' also served as outlet for a number of Bierce's best short stories. It is from these fitful(espasmódicas, caprichosas) contributions and weekly jottings that the contents of several of his books were drawn. During the late 'eighties' and 'nineties' he wielded extraordinary local influence as a kind of West Coast Samuel Johnson. San Francisco tolerated and even encouraged salient (prominent) personalities. He then was a correspondent for the *American*, and in later years was a contributor to *Cosmopolitan*.

Bierce's personal life was a series of disasters. Dead ends, failures, and tragedies marked his personal life. He was a man, like many, unfit by nature for socialized living, a non-domestic animal. The family pattern of unhappiness repeated itself on a tragic scale. His definition of marriage -'the state or condition of a community consisting of a master, a mistress, and two

slaves, making in all, two'- reflected his views of his own marriage (which ended in divorce in 1891).

In 1889 his older son was killed in a vulgar shooting-brawl over a girl; two years afterward his wife left him, finally divorcing him; in 1901 his younger son died of alcoholism; and at last in 1913 Ambrose Bierce, old, asthmatic, weary, his creative power only an acrid memory, a bitter jester(bufón) who had outlived(survive) his time, made his queer(eccentric) escape from the civilization he had for forty years derided(ridiculed), and somewhere, presumably in Mexico, encountered his favorite character, the figure who, so to speak, animates his finest stories: Death. However, there is a story that he was killed in the revolutionary war which pitted(enfrentó, opuso) Pancho Villa and Venustiano Carranza against General Victoriano Huerta.

## II. MISANTHROPIC VISION OF THE WORLD: HIS LEGEND

During Bierce's lifetime his vogue, except in and around San Francisco, stayed within modest bounds. How to 'handle' his talent so as to make it yield the maximum public success Bierce never learned nor did he care to learn. The emergence of his reputation was more or less coincidental with the disappearance of himself. The tendency grew to concentrate on the Bierce 'legend' and to neglect his books. This is ascribable to our natural fascination by the supernatural, and no less to the equally paradoxical fact that men love to hear themselves scorned(despreciado) and rejected if only the scorn and rejection are sufficiently eloquent. Finally, there is a *fin de siècle* (esteticistas y decadentes) aura about Bierce that these many years recommended him to professional and amateur èpateurs(escandalizador, criticador) of the

bourgeoisie, and a potent force among the writing men of the West Coast for the past fifty years.

The militant independence of the free lance is personified in Ambrose Bierce, the earliest American author after Poe to reflect the recognizable qualities of the movement. His restlessness(inquietud) finds its appropriate haven in Bohemia. He retreated to California, where his later career linked the bygone(pasada) frontier generation with younger writers like Jack London and George Sterling. At the turn of the century he made his home -in so far as he had one- in Washington State, which afforded increasing scope to his misanthropy.

Bierce's pessimism, cynicism, nihilism, and gallows(ácido, negro) humor are in the tradition of no-saying(pessimistic) which runs from Herman Melville to Thomas Pynchon. It is not the mordant(mordaz) wit(talento) of *The Devil's Dictionary* (first published in 1906 as *The Cynic's Word Book*) or Bierce's penchant(inclinación) for the grotesque, however, which finally makes him significant.

Today, over and above the simple fact that he is still generally readable, Bierce solicits our attention because he is a minor prophet of hopelessness (desesperanza). Indeed, the whole conduct of civilized man since Bierce's presumed death in 1914 is happily calculated to confirm his misanthropy. On August 6, 1945, the planet, with the United States in the lead, passed half-unconsciously into an era of despair. From then on, the men and women who do not like men and women are in the saddle and will ride mankind.

The dominant tendency of American literature and social thought, from Benjamin Franklin to Sinclair Lewis, has been optimistic. It has believed in man, it has believed in American man. It has at times been satirical and even bitter -but not negative. It gave the world the positive statements of the

Declaration, the Constitution, the Gettysburg Address(Abraham Lincoln, 1863), Emerson, Whitman, William James, Henry George, John Dewey. But along with it there has coursed a narrower current, the shadowed scream of pessimism. Perhaps its obscure source lies in the southern philosophers of slavery or in the bleak(inhospitalario) hell-fire(apocalyptic) morality of early puritan divines like Michael Wigglesworth and Jonathan Edwards. It flows hesitantly in Hawthorne, with fury in *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre*, with many a subtle meander(meandro) in the dark symbolisms of Poe. It runs through Stephen Crane, H.L. Mencken, and Ring Lardner. And you will see it plain, naked, naïve, and powerful, in the strange fables of Ambrose Bierce.

As our planet rolls slowly or rapidly in the direction of its own eclipse, men's minds will darken with it. New philosophies of violence and despair will be contrived, and old nihilisms be exhumed. Among these old nihilisms that of Ambrose Bierce will take its minor place and, for all his weaknesses, he will speak to us with added vehemence.

### **III. BIERCE'S LITERARY DEVELOPMENT & STYLE: HUMOR, HORROR & DISPROPORTION**

Frequently the degree of animus seems disproportionate to the issue, and usually the style is disproportionately superior to the subject. *Black Beetles in Amber* (1892) aims at the kind of elegant preservation that Pope accorded his enemies in *The Dunciad*, but Bierce's fluent verse seldom rises very high above its occasion. His prose, on the other hand, has a crisp(resuelta, nerviosa) precision which is almost unparalleled among his contemporaries; his puristic standards of usage, which he may have brought back from England, are set

forth in his little handbook, *Write It Right* (1909). America needed, but did not want, a Swift. It needed the sharp reservation of the satirist, armed like Bierce with the weapon of wit. In one of his serious essays he laments "The Passing of Satire". His phobias included millionaires, labor leaders, women, and dogs. His values were ultimately the negative values of war.

In his best work, such as *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians* (published privately in San Francisco, 1891; later retitled *In the Midst of Life*), Bierce, like Stephen Crane, Ernest Hemingway, and Norman Mailer after him, converted the disordered experience of man at war into resonant and dramatic fictional moments. Defining the novel as a 'short story padded(acolchada)', Bierce preferred the abbreviated form for its totality of effect. His technique of directing suspense toward a dramatic crisis is modeled on Poe, but Bierce's horrors are more realistically motivated: thus premature burial, in "One of the Missing", becomes a war casualty. On the other hand, "One of the Missing", like so many of his tales, shows a completely modern interest in an understanding of abnormal states of consciousness. Most of his denouements take place at graves. Editors, comprehensibly, were frightened away from these tales. Their violent obsession with sudden death cut through(combina) the conventional twists(sesgos, peculiaridades) of fiction to a mordant sense of reality.

Bierce's heroic theme, which Stephen Crane undertook a few years later, was not the Civil War in its strange grandeur, but its impact upon the individual consciousness. Every story is a single episode of conflict: son against father, lover against rival, a house -one's own- destroyed, a spy -one's brother- shot. Underlying them all, evoked in vivid imagery, is the contrast formulated in "An Affair of Outposts(avanzadas)" between the civilian's

preconceptions of military glory and the soldier's experience of ugliness and brutality.

Much of Bierce is old-fashioned. His prose at its worst is flawed with the bad taste of his period; his weakness for melodrama occasionally makes us squirm(*retorcemos*); he frequently overdoes his effects. Yet it is difficult to forget the best of his stories in *In the Midst of Life*: "An Occurrence at Owl Creek(*riachuelo*) Bridge", interesting as a trick and also as a heart-freezing(*gélida*) symbolical presentation of the depth of the passion for survival; "Chickamauga", which, by a device of brilliant originality, rams(*traer*) home the pure and shrieking(*chirriante*) insanity of war.

Bierce, despite his almost Spanish admiration for 'honor', was one of the earliest American writers to dismiss the flapdoodle(*mito, espectáculo*) of war and hold up to our gaze something like its true countenance(*cara*). It is not much that he hated war; indeed these stories are marked by a sort of agony of joy over war's horrors. He may have liked war -no true lover of war (no German, for instance) has ever been so weak-kneed(*sin voluntad*) or weak-stomached(*sin estómago*) as to attempt to disguise its brutality. But, however complicated Bierce's attitude toward war may have been, what he writes has the bitter-aloes(*áloe*) taste of truth. He helped blaze(*allanar*) the trail for later and doubtless better realists.

A minor offshoot(*vástago*) of Bierce's mastery of the grotesque is the twist he gives to the western 'tall tale'(*exagerado, increíble*). In "Curried(*curtida, al curry*) Cow", for example, he imparts to it a touch of the gruesome(*horripilante*) which in its origins it never possessed. He makes a new thing of it. (It should be noted in passing that some stories of the frontier West performed a similar service in the cause of Realism. He had no talent for local or temporal detail but he did seize upon one essential aspect of frontier



life -the cheapness with which human life was valued. Bret Harte made it lawlessness picturesque and Mark Twain made it humorous. Bierce saw it, though without indignation, for what it was -murder.)

Naturalism did not exclude the story teller's concern with the supernatural, and Bierce's rationalism operated to lend credibility to his ghost stories. Peculiarly haunting is "The Death of Halpin Frayser", with its interpolation of Bierce's own recurrent dream, its Kafkaesque nightmare of the poet lost in the wood, its Freudian realization of 'the dominance of the sexual element in all relations of life', and its extraordinary utilization of what is now called the Oedipus Complex. He himself is the lone survivor of "A Resumed Identity", a Rip Van Winkle of the Civil War to whom everything afterward is an anticlimax, reflecting Bierce's obsession with the problem of lost, split, or wandering consciousness.

Most of Bierce's other stories (included under "Can Such Things Be?" and "Negligible Tales") turn upon either the theme of the supernatural or on the humor of horror.

It is pertinent that Bierce, who disliked human beings and scoffed (mofarse de) at social relationships, should have written so much and on the whole so well about ghosts, apparitions, revenants(espíritus), were-dogs (hombres-perro), animated machines, extra-sensory perception, and action at a distance. It is as though the man's inability to stomach the real world forced him to try to establish citizenship in the country of the occult. He led a busy life, full of the usual struggle and conflict; there is little of the shrinking(contraído, acobardado) aesthete about him. Rather must we think of his interest (not necessarily his belief) in the supernatural as part and parcel of his general misanthropy.

He was obsessed by the horror of real life that he had to call in the aid of another dimension in order to express it. He seems to be saying to us: 'If I cannot make you shrink(acobardar) from life, I will make you shrink from its goal and culmination -death!'. Bierce's morbidity(pesimismo) is too controlled to have about it any touch of the insane; it merely expresses his fury at our placid healthiness. It is this emotional drive behind his most calculated horrors that makes him much more than an American Monk Lewis. His Gothicism is no hothouse(invernáculo) flower but a monstrous orchid: when he tries to write in the traditional Gothic vein, as in "The Monk and the Hangman's Daughter" (1892), he is unconvincing(poco convincente), for he is not using his own voice.

Among the stories of the impossible that the reader may wish to note with extra care are "One Summer Night", a trifle which packs into 500 words a heavy weight of horror; "Moxon's Master", which inverts La Mettrie's doctrine of man considered as a machine, and which may possibly have been suggested by Poe's wonderful account of Maelzel's Chess-player; "The Damned Thing", a masterpiece in a genre in which Bierce has since been equaled only by H.G. Wells; and "Häüta the Shepherd", a grave and bitter fable, almost worthy of Poe, expressing the idea -so true and so continually rejected by men- that to seek happiness is to lose it.

Bierce's morbidity(pesimismo) was exceptionally fertile -he made it produce humor as well as chills. In this extremely narrow field of the sardonic(sarcástico, burlón), of the ludicrous(ridícula, absurda) ghost story and the comical murder, he is unrivaled. He begins by somehow making you accept his basic premise: death is a joke. The rest is deadpan(sin expresión) elaboration, with the deadpan occasionally relieved by the rictus of a ghoul(demonio, necrófago) trying to laugh. Perhaps the two best examples are

"My Favorite Murder" and "Oil of Dog". "My Favorite Murder" is outrageous(atroz, terrible), it is frightening -it is funny. One finishes in it through agreement with the narrator that 'in point of artistic atrocity' the murder of Uncle William has seldom been excelled. The humor of the unbelievable "Oil of Dog" depends on a careful, indeed beautiful use of ironical understatement(exposición incompleta, sutileza), and the exhaustiveness of the technique whereby the macabre is pushed to such an extreme that it falls somehow into the gulf of laughter. One will not easily forget Mr. Boffer Bing's mother who had "a small studio in the shadow of the village church, where she disposed of unwelcome babes"(800/1). The choice of the word 'studio' is one of the happiest thoughts of the unhappy Bierce.

On the other hand, the nuclear(concentrado) Bierce is to be found in the 'Fantastic Fables'. One should not read more than a dozen of them at a time, just as one should not read more than a dozen jokes at a time. Their quality lies in their ferocious concentration of extra-double-distilled essential oil(esencia) of misanthropy. They are so condensed that they take your breath away. His 'Fantastic Fables' strike us as neither fantastic nor fabulous. He seems quite a man of our time.

The theme is always the same: mankind is a scoundrel(canalla, sinvergüenza); but the changes rung upon the theme demonstrate an almost abnormal inventiveness. They have no humor -they do not resemble at all, for instance, the fables of George Ade. They have wit but little fancy, they are undecorated, and they sting painfully. The brutal Bierce allows no exceptions. He aims to make mincemeat(picadillo) of all civilized humanity, -lawyers and weather forecasters, doctors and detectives, widows and photographers, editors and insurance agents, anarchists and female journalists, men and women.

Bierce is not, of course, a great writer. He has painful faults of vulgarity and cheapness of imagination. But at his best he is like no one else. He had, for example, a mastery of pared(reducidas) phrasing(máximas) equaled in our time perhaps only by Wilde and Shaw. When he defines marriage, he is saying something that many other unhappy men and women have said -but he is saying it in a way impossible to improve or forget.

Those weaknesses are apparent. Bierce's nihilism is as brutal and simple as a blow, and by the same token(indicio, muestra, señal) not too convincing. It has no base in philosophy and, being quite bare of shading(sutileza) or qualification, becomes, if taken in overdoses, a trifle(un poquito) tedious. Except for the skeleton grim(macabro, horrible, inexorable) that creeps over his face when he has devised in his fiction some peculiarly grotesque death, Bierce never deviates into cheerfulness(buen humor, alegría). His rage(ira) is unselective. The great skeptics view human nature without admiration but also without ire. Bierce's misanthropy is too systematic. He is a pessimism-machine. He is a Swift minus true intellectual power, Rochefoucauld with a bludgeon(cachiporra), Voltaire with stomach-ulcers.

Nevertheless he can and will be read with interest in an age which is getting ready to renounce compromise, kindness, and Christianity. The corrosive definitions of *The Devil's Dictionary* will make their appeal to a generation which all over the world is being carefully conditioned to believe in nothing but Force. His cynicism, phrased with really extraordinary concentration, appalled(horrorizar, aterrar) his contemporaries; but it is more likely to attract than to appall us.

His style, for one thing, will preserve him, though, for how long no one would care to say; and the purity of his misanthropy, too, will help to keep him alive. It is good that literature should be so catholic and wide-wayed(de

amplias miras) that it affords scope to every emotion and attitude, even the unloveliest(*el más feo, desgarbado*). It is fitting that someone should be born and live and die, dedicated to the expression of bitterness(*amargura*). For bitterness is a mood that comes to all intelligent men, though, as they are intelligent, only intermittently. It is proper that there should be at least one man able to give penetrating expression to that mood. Bierce is such a man - limited, wrong-headed(*obstinado, terco*), unbalanced, but, in his own constricted(*limitada*) way, an artist.

He will remain one of the most interesting and eccentric figures in American literature, one of the great wits(*ingenios*), one of the most uncompromising (*intransigente*) satirists, the perfecter of two or three new, if minor, genres: a writer one cannot casually pass by.