

UNIT 5

AMBROSE BIERCE (1842-1914?)

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

I. INTRODUCTION: BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

1842, Meigs County, Ohio (log cabin) --> last of nine children + strongly religious parents + poor, eccentric farmer --> unhappy childhood --> cut himself off from parents and all but one brother (Albert) --> theory of last children ==> later addiction to aristocratic heroes + horrifying humorous tales (parricide, matricide, avuculicide) => assault on all form of authority

Supernatural in fiction = attempt to escape ordinary society ('Bitter Bierce')

Disappointed with past, present & future = pessimism

Wrote like educated man --> hardly explained --> 1 year in Kentucky Military Institute + Civil War --> volunteer with Union Army ('leadership') ==> most finely felt, least posed stories ("Chickamauga" & "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge") --> war = 'by-product of the arts of peace' <--> peace = 'a period of cheating between two periods of fighting'

After war --> San Francisco (focal point of career) --> night-watchman + local politics + cartoonist (ire with impartiality)

1866-1872, *Argonaut & News Letter* (editor) --> Mark Twain, Bret Harte, Joaquin Miller & George Sterling --> San Francisco = literary center

1871, married Mary Ellen Day (daughter of '49-er) --> 1872-1876 London --> slashing journalism ('Bitter Bierce') + influence of George Augustus Sala & Thomas Hood --> crude western humorist into satirist (elegance & bite)

1876, bad health + back to San Francisco --> *Argonaut & Wasp*

1887-1896, 'Prattler' column = reviews, gossip, political & social commentary & short stories (*Argonaut & Wasp*) --> 1886-1896, William Randolph Hearst's *San Francisco Sunday Examiner*

Late 80s & 90s --> local influence (West Coast Samuel Johnson) -->

correspondent (*American*) + contributor (*Cosmopolitan*)

Personal life = disaster (unfit for socialized living, non-domestic animal)

--> family pattern of unhappiness (definition of marriage)

1889, older son killed + 1891, divorce + 1901, younger son died alcoholism + 1913 Bierce --> escape from civilization (Mexico) --> Death

II. MISANTHROPIC VISION OF THE WORLD: HIS LEGEND

Vogue, within modest bounds + never learned to sell himself --> Reputation after death --> + 'legend' <--> -- books (natural fascination for supernatural + love to hear ourselves scorned & rejected) + *fin de siècle* aura

Militant independence (Poe) --> Bohemia --> California (frontier generation + younger writers -Jack London & George Sterling) --> XX, Washington

Pessimism, cynicism, nihilism & gallows humor = tradition of no-saying

Not *The Cynic's Word Book* + grotesque, but *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians* (experience of man at war = resonant & dramatic fictional moments)

Generally readable --> minor prophet of hopelessness (era of despair)

Dominant tendency of Am lit & soc thought (Franklin to Lewis) = optimistic (Declaration + Constitution + Gettysburg Address + Emerson + Whitman...)

<====> Narrower current --> pessimism (south phil of slavery & puritan morality + Hawthorne, Poe, Melville...) --> fables of Ambrose Bierce

Planet to own eclipse --> new philosophies of violence & despair (nihilisms)
 Weaknesses = nihilism is brutal & simple (not too convincing) + rage is
 unselective + misanthropy too systematic + pessimism-machine (Swift minus
 true intellectual power or Voltaire with stomach-ulcers)
 Read --> Age to renounce compromise, kindness & Christianity --> Bierce's
 cynicism = more attract than appall us

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

Degree of animus disproportionate to issue + style superior to subject
Black Beetles in Amber (1892) --> fluent verse seldom rises --> prose crisp
 precision unparalleled + puristic standards of usage (*Write It Right*, 1909)
 Sharp reservation of satirist with wit ("The Passing of Satire")
 Phobias --> millionaires, labor leaders, women & dogs (negative values war)
In the Midst of Life -Tales of Soldiers and Civilians, 1891 --> novel = 'short
 story padded' (totality of effect) --> technique (<-- Poe) --> horrors more
 realistic (premature burial = war casualty "One of the Missing") -->
 Modern interest in understanding abnormal states of consciousness +
 obsession with sudden death ("The Mocking Bird")
 Heroic theme (-> Stephen Crane) = impact upon the individual consciousness
 story = single episode of conflict (son/father, lover/rival...)
 "An Affair of Outposts" = civilian's preconceptions <--> soldier's experience
 Rationalism lends credibility to ghost stories ("The Death of Halpin Frayser")
 "A Resumed Identity" (problem of lost, split, wandering consciousness)
 "The Night-Doings at Deadman's Gulch" (former topographer officer)

Old-fashioned --> worst = bad taste of his period + weakness for melodrama
 Yet "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" = symbol of passion for survival &
 "Chickamauga" = insanity of war --> Spanish admiration for honor <->
 dismiss war flapdoodle, true countenance ==> Helped later & better realists
 Minor grotesque --> western 'tall tale' --> "Curried Cow" touch of gruesome
 No talent for local/temporal detail <--> essential aspect of frontier life = cheap
 value of life (Bret Harte-lawlessness picturesque & Twain-humorous) Bierce
 saw it, though without indignation, for what it was -murder.)
 "Can Such Things Be?" & "Negligible Tales" -> supernatural/humor of horror
 Disliked human beings & scoffed at social relationships (ghosts, apparitions,
 revenants, were-dogs, animated machines, extra-sensory perception & action
 at a distance) ==> man's inability to stomach the real world --> occult
 Obsessed by horror of real life --> another dimension to express it
 Morbidity too controlled to have touch of insane (fury at our healthiness)
 Gothic ("The Monk and the Hangman's Daughter", 1892) = unconvincing
 Stories of the impossible: "One Summer Night" = 500 words of heavy horror
 "Moxon's Master" = inverts man considered as a machine (<- Poe)
 "The Damned Thing" = masterpiece in science fiction (-> H.G. Wells)
 "Haüta the Shepherd" = grave & bitter fable (to seek happiness is to lose it)
 Bierce's morbidity = humor as well as chills --> In narrow field of sardonic,
 ludicrous ghost story & comical murder --> unrivaled + begins by making you
 accept basic premise: death a joke + deadpan elaboration
 2 best examples: "My Favorite Murder" (outrageous, frightening, funny) &
 "Oil of Dog" (macabre pushed to laughter) --> ('studio')
 Nuclear Bierce in 'Fantastic Fables' (extra-double-distilled essential oil of
 misanthropy + condensed + neither fantastic nor fabulous -> man of our time

Theme = mankind scoundrel --> abnormal inventiveness + no humor + wit no fancy + undecorated + sting painfully --> Mincemeat of humanity

Not a great writer --> painful faults of vulgarity & cheapness of imagination

At best --> mastery of pared phrasing (Wilde & Shaw)

Style will preserve him + purity of misanthropy --> keep him alive

Good! = literature affords every emotion & attitude, even unloveliest

Fitting = someone born & live & die dedicated to expression of bitterness

Limited, wrong-headed, unbalanced, but in own constricted way, an artist

One of most interesting & eccentric figures in Am lit = wit, uncompromising satirist, perfecter of two new (minor) genres: cannot be casually pass by