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Keywords

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"[T]his is a world of fools and rogues, blind with superstition...cursed
with illusions—frothing mad!"
—Ambrose Bierce, "To Train a Writer"

Ambrose Bierce once declared of the dismal state of the human condition: "I have no love to waste upon the irreclaimable mass of brutality that we know as 'mankind.' Compassion, yes—I am sincerely sorry that they are brutes" (*Letters* 4). Serving as a topographical engineer in the American Civil War, Bierce experienced the death and destruction in some of the most infamous battles of the war and later used that experience with "brutality" to expose the failings of romanticizing and glorifying war in his writings. While many readers are solely intrigued by Ambrose Bierce's disappearance and involvement in the Mexican Civil War with such revolutionaries as Pancho Villa, it was his experiences with the American Civil War that influenced his often pessimistic writings in both fiction and journalism. Bierce's cynical works, many of which contained ruthless criticisms of pro-war propagandists, earned him the moniker "Bitter Bierce" (Brower). In his graphic works decrying the "virtues" of war, Bierce explored ideals of heroism and glory and his estrangement from them after carrying a wounded soldier from a battlefield only to watch the soldier die after rescue (Brower). In his 1891 short story "Chickamauga," he recreates this ambivalence in a scathing anti-war allegory as two worlds, one with a child's naiveté and innocence and one with the tangible loss of war, collide with catastrophic results. Bierce uses a deaf-mute child to represent the naïve young soldiers in the Civil War in order to assert that it is society's obsession with proving masculinity through war that leads men into battle, only to have them come out the other side finding their ideals to have been grotesquely distorted, if they survive at all.

David Yost has shown that in the late nineteenth century, with the increase of male alcoholism and the expansion of the feminist movement, many Americans began to recognize a “degeneration” in masculinity (247). In their efforts to stave off this degeneration, “masculinity became increasingly defined as an aggressive and physical activism as opposed to the previous emphasis on self-discipline and responsibility” (247). It was this changing ideal of masculinity, one that required men to prove themselves in some of the most violent ways possible, that Bierce fought to stifle. With their virility called into question, these men, and in many cases, boys, killed their fellow Americans in the name of glory and heroism, with many sacrificing their own lives in their endeavor to prove themselves courageous. Twenty-some years after the battle of Chickamauga, Bierce described the harmful effects of war stories that depict battle as glorious in a “Prattle” column on January 23, 1886: “these battle yarns, indeed, are nursing a baby war, which now lies mouthing its fat knuckles and marking time with its pinky feet, in a cradle of young imaginations, but in another decade it will be striding through the land in seven-language boots, chewing soap.” This depiction of war as a baby feeding off of the stories about glorious battles and heroic deeds, tainting the minds of America’s naïve youth, expresses Bierce’s unwillingness to glorify war, while also justifying his “bitter” moniker. Bierce’s idea of young minds being corrupted by exaggerated tales is exemplified in “Chickamauga,” as the central consciousness is not one of the young soldiers who Bierce depicts in the quote above, but rather a child, struggling to live up to the stories of battle and bravery he saw in his picture books.

The Battle of Chickamauga took place September 19-20, 1863, and while the Confederate army declared it a triumph, Donald T. Blume has called the campaign a “Pyrrhic victory,” as the high number of casualties on the southern side all but undermined the idea of triumph (134). Estimates of northern casualties totaled 16,179, while the “victorious” south lost an estimated 14,328, but rather than describing the high death tolls and large scale destruction of the actual battle, Bierce chose to depict the war through the eyes of a boy playing in the forest (134). Just as many young soldiers were swayed to war through a desire to prove themselves, the boy of Bierce’s story ventures into the woods to mimic “the postures of aggression and defense that he had been taught” (“Chickamauga” 625). The narrator describes how the boy’s father “had fought against naked savages and followed the flag of his

country into the capital of a civilized race to the far South” (625). Here Bierce recounts one of many persuasions used to drive men to war, stating that it is a part of their heritage, an inheritance that “once kindled, is never extinguished” (625). The six-year-old boy wanders into the woods, a foreign land, just as the soldiers of the Civil War traveled away from the familiarity of their homes. Yet in spite of bearing their weapons bravely as the boy does with his wooden sword, they are merely playing at war.

Bierce’s juxtaposition of a six-year-old boy pretend-fighting in the woods with the young soldiers fighting in the Civil War serves not only to illustrate the “brutalization of innocence in war time” but also to further the idea that many of the soldiers, with their lack of understanding of war’s true impact, are merely playing at war, vanquishing invisible foes with reckless conviction until they experience destruction first-hand (Blume 135). As Bierce demanded in another “Prattle” column, “study the history and literature of any vanquished people immediately before the war in which they were humbled and you will find that they held the strongest convictions possible” (“Prattle” Feb. 3, 1889). Here Bierce is clearly identifying the inability of not only the Confederates, but any soldier who loses a battle, to see or even predict defeat because of their inflated ideals of glory and national pride. This statement also holds true for the boy in the woods who even in the midst of gore and death fails to realize his misunderstandings until he is “defeated” at the close of the story, with the burning of his home and the brutal death of his mother.

The narrator describes how, after falling asleep in the forest for some time, the boy sees “a strange moving object which he took to be some large animal...he could not name it” (“Chickamauga” 626). The child, who “had seen pictures of bears, but knew of nothing to their discredit,” is emblematic of an ignorance of reality on which war efforts depend (626). Here, Bierce continues to perpetuate the idea of the naiveté of young soldiers who, like the boy, heard tales of war but knew nothing of the character of war personally. The narrator continues to depict the boy’s inexperience, as he comes to recognize that the crawling men, lacking the strength to stand, are indeed men and not animals as he originally thought, but that is where his understanding ends. The narrator states, “[H]e saw little but that these were men, yet crept like babes” and he describes the boy examining the men “with childish curiosity” (627). In his ignorance of war’s ruin the boy fails to comprehend the “face that lacked a lower

jaw” with its “great red gap fringed with hanging shreds of flesh and splinters of bone” or the fates of the men “who had paused and did not again go on, but lay motionless” (627). The narrator describes the “dramatic contrast between his laughter and their own ghastly gravity,” referring to the boy’s comparison of the men to clowns in a circus; again, the child bases his conclusions on his very limited knowledge and experience. Just as he guessed at the identity of the men based on pictures of animals he had never encountered, the boy’s only other encounter with men on their hands and knees occurred when his father’s slaves pretended to be horses allowing him to ride on their backs. But when the boy mimics this action by climbing atop the jawless soldier in the woods, the man sinks to the ground, with the boy likening the movement to “an unbroken colt” (627). The child continuously regards the soldiers in animalistic terms, considering one as “a great bird of prey crimsoned in throat and breast” and likening the whole group of soldiers to “a swarm of great black beetles” (627). In this way, the boy dehumanizes the men, another aspect of war that Bierce addresses as the boy leads the men through the woods like a shepherd leading sheep.

When he spots the fire through the trees glinting off the metal adorning the soldier’s uniforms, the boy moves to the front of the men; as the narrator ironically comments, “Surely such a leader never before had such a following” (“Chickamauga” 628). Yost states that “Bierce’s heroes often meet their specially prepared ironic fate because of their traditionally manly virtues” (250), which readers see in “Chickamauga” as the boy’s desire to live up to the “feats of discovery and conquest” of his ancestors puts him on path that destroys his innocence (625). The fire dazzles the young boy, and as he makes his way toward its “growing splendor” he fails to acknowledge the evidence of destruction around him (628). The narrator states once again that “an observer of better experience” would have noticed the footprints and realized that while the child slept, a battle was fought, but the boy, pretending to be a brave leader, marches on toward the flames, never stopping even as the men behind him drown in the river, unable to hold their bodies off the ground (628). Once the boy sees the destruction surrounding the fire, the narrator remarks, “he cared nothing for that,” referring to the boy’s focus on the grandiosity of the blaze, another object he has never encountered before (628). When the boy dances “with glee in imitation of the wavering flames,” a parallel is drawn to the many soldiers who excitedly awaited the

glory they thought lay in battle (628). And just as those men, including Bierce, came to understand the monstrosity of war, the boy finally recognizes his foolish misapprehension, realizing he has danced in front of the burning embers of his own home.

Blume asserts that Bierce's stories focus on the disillusionment not only of soldiers but also of civilians, and such stories as "Chickamauga" serve to show readers that "while this latest crop of men are off playing at war and seeking glory and shiny medals their parents and loved ones may be shelled to death" (150). Bierce's protagonist experiences this revelation as "his little world swung half around; the points of the compass were reversed" ("Chickamauga" 629). The pretend enemies that the boy set out to destroy in the woods destroyed his home and his family while he was away, underscoring the idea that when soldiers leave their homes in search of glory, their families lie unprotected. And just as Bierce claimed, the losing side of the battle doesn't recognize the many signs of defeat until it is too late. The boy sees men unable to stand, drowning for lack of strength, and with grisly wounds, and yet he fails to comprehend his loss until he finds his mother, her head "a frothy mass of gray, crowned with clusters of crimson bubbles—the work of a shell" (629). The child danced in the flames of his own burning house, a grim performance reminiscent of the celebrations of battles like Chickamauga, where revelers would applaud the destruction of their countrymen in willful ignorance of the great losses on their own side.

Following the shocking realization of the death of the boy's mother and the destruction of his home, Bierce ends the story with another revelation: "the child was a deaf mute" (629). While the disillusioned soldiers that Bierce is caricaturing weren't literally deaf and mute, the child's disability fits the allegory, as the soldiers were both deaf to reality and mute in their vain attempts to warn others of the destruction of war. In describing southern soldiers in this way, Bierce stated that the soldier who "endeavored to calm the storms of passion and spare his section the humiliation of inevitable defeat was hissed as a fool and silenced as a traitor" ("Prattle" Feb. 3, 1889). The boy's muteness parallels the voicelessness of these futile advisers, and his deafness represents the failure of the mass of soldiers to heed such warnings due to their obsession with glory and inability to comprehend war as Bierce saw it, a destructive force that draws men in with deceit. Without his hearing, the boy in the woods sleeps through the battle, missing the carnage and destruction that surely would have made him realize that

the men in the woods are not playthings or animals to be commanded but essentially children like himself. The boy cannot hear the groans of men lying nearly dead or the sounds of the men drowning in the stream; instead, the boy's sheltered experience leads him to regard the destruction as a game.

Biographer Vincent Starrett has described a special fear of Bierce's, that of not being heard. Bierce's epithet, "My how my fame rings out in every zone / A thousand critics shouting, 'He's unknown!'" epitomizes this fear, which is also reminiscent of the boy's muteness in "Chickamauga" (qtd. in Starrett 24). And just as the soldiers were unable to express their fears and concerns over war, the boy's muteness in the story is suggestive of Bierce's fear not of having his works ignored, but of his messages about war not being acknowledged. In his poem, "A Warning," Bierce writes, "Cried Age to Youth: 'Abate your speed!— / The distance hither's brief indeed.' / But youth pressed on without delay— / The shout had reached by half the way" (*Shapes* 266). Here Bierce warns the young, soldiers or otherwise, not to actively give up their childhood, and the innocence and naiveté that is associated with it, but his shouts are not heard. The boy, having discovered his mother's body, is described as "making wild, uncertain gestures. He uttered a series of inarticulate and indescribable cries" ("Chickamauga" 629). This depiction represents Bierce's discovery of war's destruction coupled with the fear that he too is mute, and is unable to warn young soldiers against the pro-war propaganda that glorified battle.

This concern for the naiveté and innocence in youth is mirrored in Bierce's interactions with George Sterling, Hermann Scheffauer, and Blanche Partington, young writers whom Bierce mentored after the war. In one of his many letters to Sterling, an American poet and playwright, Bierce declared, "I've a notion you'll find other tragedies among the stars if earth doesn't supply you with high enough themes" (*Letters* 59). Bierce asserts that tragedies can be invented and fictionalized, but Earth provides plenty of tragedies, alluding to the ruin of the Civil War, which he references in his writings. Bierce's warning against relinquishing youth conflates the folly of young soldiers marching off to war with the young writers that Bierce mentored, whom he likely feared would not hear his warnings. For example, after dancing in the fire, the boy "flung in his sword" ("Chickamauga" 628). The gesture is symbolic of his renunciation of the war, but it comes too late, as his mother and home are already gone (628).

While Bierce has figuratively “flung in his sword,” having experienced war and its inherent tragedies, his young friends still retain their child-like outlooks, perpetuating the idea that Bierce’s warning extends beyond the military to the world of writers.

In an 1887 *Examiner* column, Bierce criticized another writer, stating, “If he was ever a boy he knows that the year is divided, not into seasons and months, as is vulgarly supposed, but into ‘top time,’ ‘marble time,’ ‘kite time,’ et cetera, and woe to the boy who ignored the unwritten calendar, amusing himself according to the dictates of an irresponsible conscience” (*Letters* xxii). Bierce continually reminisces about his boyhood and criticizes writers who fail to acknowledge this special time. Bierce laments that children like the boy in “Chickamauga,” orphaned, killed, or pulled into battle, have their childhood abruptly taken from them often without choice, perpetuating the idea that “A Warning” is Bierce’s lament for lost childhood. Bierce describes the deaf-mute boy’s “impressionable mind” and how “instinctively the child turned toward the growing splendor” of the fire (“Chickamauga” 626, 628). The boy is ruled completely by his limited knowledge and his baser instincts, which is a folly for young soldiers and young writers alike. In an 1893 letter to Blanche Partington, Bierce writes, “If you had more experience of life I should regard what you say as entirely conclusive against your possession of any talent of a literary kind. But you are so young and untaught in that way” (*Letters* 3). Here Bierce relates the folly of young soldiers with no experience in war to Blanche’s inexperience in life affecting her writing. Bierce explains the importance of gaining experience, but warns through his young protagonist’s tragedy what can be lost when that experience, whether tragic or otherwise, is obtained. In another letter to Partington, Bierce writes, “The boy needs discipline, control, and work. He needs to learn by experience that life is not all beer and skittles,” referring to his son, Leigh, who was 21 at the time (*Letters* 27-28). After Leigh’s death due to complications from alcoholism, the folly Bierce desired to steer him from, Bierce wrote to Sterling: “Leigh died a year ago this morning. I wish I could stop counting the days” (*Letters* 58). Bierce’s inability to save his son from his vices mirrors his fears of not being heard, and his continued desire to mentor writers like Partington, Sterling, and Sheffauer could well have been an attempt to compensate for his failure to positively influence Leigh.

In describing the rumbling of the earth as the battle of Chickamauga raged on around the

sleeping boy, the narrator notes the presence of “a strange muffled thunder, as if the partridges were drumming in celebration of nature’s victory over the son of her immemorial enslavers” (“Chickamauga” 626). Here the narrator imagines the rumble of the battle as birds drumming to celebrate a victory in the natural world. Bierce personifies nature as a woman who has been enslaved but finds freedom in the midst of battle. This trope may refer to sleep, a natural state, overtaking the young child and sheltering him from the battle, which, had he been awake, likely would have killed him. It might also be referring to the idea that, as Blume puts it, “something as universally human as fear and not romantic aspirations for glory plays a major role in determining the outcome of battles” (145). Fear is a natural human response, an emotion that the boy does not experience until the revelations at the close of the story. Similarly, Bierce stated that in battle, “men do not fight as heroically as they are said to fight; they are not as brave as they are said to be” (“Prattle” Dec. 23, 1888). Nature triumphs as fear destroys the illusions that men have about war. As the soldiers kill and recognize the possibility that they themselves can be killed, fear changes their idealistic views to much more accurate representations of the world, just as the boy recognizes destruction for the first time in light of his mother’s death. The boy in “Chickamauga,” coming to terms with his home’s destruction and his mother’s death, can only stand “motionless, with quivering lips, looking down upon the wreck” (629). The boy no longer dances or laughs, mirroring the impact that the war had on young soldiers who returned home, unable to live as lighthearted and untroubled as they had before.

In “Chickamauga,” Bierce appropriates Lord Byron’s *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* in describing the inability of his protagonist to “curb the lust for war,” just as Napoleon was unable to do (626). In his poem, “An Inscription,” regarding a statue of Napoleon at West Point, Bierce describes Napoleon as “A famous conqueror in battle brave, / Who robbed the cradle to supply the grave. / His reign laid quantities of human dust: / He fell upon the just and the unjust” (*Shapes* 325). Bierce’s line describing war as “robb[ing] the cradle to supply the grave” reiterates the idea that war devastates youth, yet Napoleon’s depiction as a worthy conqueror deserving of a statue perpetuates the misconception that war is glorious. By referencing Byron’s poem, Bierce reiterates the misunderstanding of young soldiers, and their inability to see the reality of war’s destruction because of their lack of experience. Bierce

describes the forest in “Chickamauga” as “the dark inclosing wood” (626). Woods are often motifs for evil and misadventure throughout literature, and just as the bloodied, dying men “would have been noted by an elder observer,” the metaphorical darkness of the forest would have been understood by a protagonist with prior experience with destruction. But such recognition is beyond the scope of this young boy who fears “the long menacing ears of a rabbit” (626).

In a fragment from a letter to an unknown person, Bierce describes a forest reminiscent of the one he describes in “Chickamauga”:

I have told her of a certain “enchanted forest” hereabout to which I feel myself sometimes strongly drawn as a fitting place to lay down “my weary body and head”.... The element of enchantment in that forest is supplied by my wandering and dreaming in it forty-one years ago when I was a-soldiering and there were new things under a new sun. It is miles away, but from a near-by summit I can overlook the entire region—ridge beyond ridge, parted by purple valleys full of sleep. Unlike me, it has not visibly altered in all these years, except that I miss, here and there, a thin blue ghost of smoke from an enemy’s camp. Can you guess my feelings when I view this Dream-land—my Realm of adventure, inhabited by members that beckon me from every valley? I shall go; I shall retrace my old routes and lines of march; stand in my old camps; inspect my battlefields to see that all is right and undisturbed. I shall go to the Enchanted Forest. (*Letters* 204)

Here Bierce’s description of his desire to “lay down” in the enchanted forest mirrors the boy in “Chickamauga,” who, “overcome by fatigue...lay down in a narrow space between two rocks... [and] sobbed himself to sleep” (626). The land of enchantment he discusses is an ironic representation of his wartime experience, but his use of the word *enchantment* suggests that this region could also represent the youth and innocence that he lost during his years as a soldier. In other words, Bierce implies that his wartime self is unaltered, omitting any negative qualities, and his comparison of his unaltered past

to his “visibly altered” present self suggests a desire to return to that time. Based on Bierce’s rejection of the glorification of war, his desire to return to this enchanted wood is a desire to return not to the desolation of war but to youth itself, which Bierce describes as “The Period of Possibility” (“Youth”). As Bierce wrote in a letter to George Sterling, “You are still young enough to profit by the pain; my character is made—my opportunities gone,” perpetuating the idea that the “new sense of freedom from control” that his protagonist feels is worth the tragedy that later befalls him (*Letters* 83, “Chickamauga” 625). Bierce’s advice to Sterling suggests that adventures and misadventures in youth shape who you are, and perhaps Bierce, shaped by war’s destruction and the ambivalence of heroism, was unhappy with his “bitter” character. In his foreword to Bierce’s collection of letters, Sterling recounts how when asked, “You must be very proud, Mr. Bierce, of all your books and your fame?” Bierce responded, “No, you will come to know that all that is worthwhile in life is the love you have had for a few people near you” (*Letters* xxix). This response contrasts with Bierce’s usual cynicism; Bierce’s perpetual focus on youth suggests that his mentoring of young writers was a cathartic act, and a way of overcoming his fear of the muteness suffered by his young protagonist.

As the nineteenth century saw rapid technological and social changes, the United States experienced a masculinity crisis, and the Civil War became an outlet for men to prove their courage and bravery as they were fueled by imagined futures of glory and heroism. Ambrose Bierce, who was once just as naïve as many of the other young men drawn to battle by propaganda that portrayed masculinity as aggression and fighting, later fought to destroy the pro-war ideals of glory and honor through his writings. With “Chickamauga,” Bierce attempted to subvert the romantic ideals of heroism by creating a character who, through his youth, ignorance, deafness, and muteness, parallels the soldiers who marched into battle as an homage to their fathers and grandfathers, only to realize too late that war is not a sacred duty to be passed down, or a badge of courage that must be earned, but rather a negation of the very human values they had believed themselves to be fighting for. ❧

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