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A Jaded Romantic: Uncovering the True Nature of Ambrose Bierce

S. Marianne Johnson
Gettysburg College

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Abstract

Ambrose Bierce, 1842-1913?, has become renowned in the Civil War world for his sharp-witted and cynical short stories that frequently feature ghastly death and the terrible irony of survival. His life has become somewhat of a caricature, used by historians such as Mark Snell and Gerald Linderman to demonstrate the utter disillusionment of the common soldier and the retreat into hibernation in an attempt to escape the trauma experienced during the war. This view of Bierce fails to capture the complexity of the man and his war experience. Rather than a skeptical realist, Bierce demonstrates the characteristics of a jaded romantic. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, 150th Anniversary, Gettysburg, Civil War Memory, Sesquicentennial, Ambrose Bierce

Disciplines

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

A Jaded Romantic: Uncovering the True Nature of Ambrose Bierce

April 25, 2014

By: Sarah Johnson, '15

Ambrose Bierce, 1842-1913?, has become renowned in the Civil War world for his sharp-witted and cynical short stories that frequently feature ghastly death and the terrible irony of survival. His life has become somewhat of a caricature, used by historians such as Mark Snell and Gerald Linderman to demonstrate the utter disillusionment of the common soldier and the retreat into hibernation in an attempt to escape the trauma experienced during the war. This view of Bierce fails to capture the complexity of the man and his war experience. Rather than a skeptical realist, Bierce demonstrates the characteristics of a jaded romantic.



The typical and oversimplified narrative of Bierce's war service is as follows: a highly enthusiastic nineteen year old farm boy enlisted in the army, "saw the elephant" at Shiloh, experienced disillusionment and an utter loss of idealism until being seriously wounded at Kennesaw Mountain in 1864 and functionally taken out of the war. What this story misses, however, are key events during Bierce's time as a soldier and the way he remembered them for decades afterwards. Bierce revealed himself to be a brave soldier. In an incident starkly reminiscent of his short story "A Son of the Gods," Bierce volunteered to go out and scout a ridge to draw enemy fire. In 1862, he exposed himself to fire to carry a wounded comrade, Corporal Boothroyd, back into the lines at Rich

Mountain. Bierce would later write he was "vain enough to be rather proud of" events such as these. In these instances, Bierce proved his manhood and his abilities as a soldier.

Although no one who knew Bierce in the post war years would deny his public fury and harsh criticism, those who knew him in private recalled a starkly different private man. Walter Neale, publisher of Bierce's Complete Works, wrote "Bierce's reputation for brutality rests mainly on the acts of his characters." Neale attributed a failure to disconnect the author from the character as the key reason for misunderstanding Bierce. In private, Neale and other close friends wrote of the sensitive inner Bierce, a man who cried, "abhorred cruelty," and was "singularly compassionate." C. Hartley Grattan, author of the first Bierce biography published in 1929, made an interesting connection between the publicly gruff and privately soft Bierce. Bierce, Grattan wrote, went to war with sentimentality and emotion because of his own romanticism and the constant heartbreak it brought him. Bierce's post-war years were not happy ones; an ongoing struggle with severe asthma, separation from his wife, the tragic deaths of both of his sons, along with several suicides of close friends wore him down physically and mentally. Often he spent weeks at a time ill and grieving, rarely seeing anyone. Added to this was his disgust with the corruption of Radical Reconstruction and the Gilded Age. It is little wonder that concurrent with these tragedies his Civil War short stories appeared injected with the bitterness of what life failed to bring him.

Increasingly, Bierce began to long nostalgically for the war days, when, despite the death, he had been sure of himself as a man. Referring to his former battlefields as his "enchanted forest," Bierce vowed he would return to the fields that so alluringly called his name. Twice in the last ten years of his life he toured his old battlefields. Writing to a female friend, Bierce sarcastically wrote that he wanted to take her with him to show her "just how and where I saved the Union for the workingman and the suffragette, the socialist, anarchist and eugenicist, the Christian Scientist and the Puritan." (Bierce was fiercely antifeminist, antisocialist, and anti-religion) In Bierce's eyes, what he saw as the deterioration of the Union did not deserve the best years of his manhood and his brave war service. Bierce's daughter later would comment that her father was an avid student of war and loved studying fighting. When asked why he was heading down to Mexico to observe the revolution taking place, Bierce replied simply, "I like fighting." Going to Mexico provided him a sense of romanticized exhilaration and purpose not experienced since his Civil War days. Separating Bierce's war service from his famously bitter fictional Civil War stories reveals less an outright rejection of the war and more a deeply sensitive and romantic man repeatedly jaded out of the life he imagined for himself.



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