

ANALYSIS

“Chickamauga” (1891)

Ambrose Bierce

(1842-1914?)

One of his gothic Civil War stories, “Chickamauga” follows a little boy only 6 years old from his cabin as he wanders onto the battlefield nearby. His perceptions of horrific sights he does not understand are rendered in an Expressionistic style very original for the time. This story resembles the nightmare Bierce had at the age of 16 before he went to war. He wandered through a wasteland until he came upon a corpse that proved to be himself. In his childhood, he felt abandoned by his mother. In this story, the death of his mother leaves the boy abandoned. The narrative, like Stephen Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage* four years later, sustains ironic contrasts throughout, beginning with the sunny day of the battle.

Bierce makes the child analogous to the Pilgrims in his “new sense of freedom from control, happy in the opportunity of exploration and adventure; for this child’s spirit, in bodies of its ancestors, had for many thousands of years been trained to memorable feats of discovery and conquest.” The little boy’s father had been a soldier who fought Indians—“naked savages.” There is no irony in Bierce’s salute, when the child is said to be “the son of an heroic race...[that] conquered its way through two continents, and passing a great sea, had penetrated a third, there to be born to war and dominion as a heritage.” As a Naturalist, Bierce believed Manifest Destiny was an irresistible force of Nature.

As demonstrated in the American Revolution and again in the Civil War, “In the peaceful life of a planter the warrior-fire survived; once kindled, it is never extinguished.” The child personifies the intrepid spirit of the American farmer turned soldier as he advances through the darkening forest, brandishing his toy sword. Until he gets frightened by a rabbit!--and runs away like Henry will do in *The Red Badge*--crying for his mother. Meanwhile, with a pathos absent from Poe, back at his home, a little plantation “where white men and black were hastily searching the fields and hedges in alarm, a mother’s heart was breaking for her missing child.” Here, as in “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge,” Bierce transcends his identification with the Union Army and elicits compassion for Southerners, any disrespect for whom always infuriated him.

War reduces men to animals, imaged here as wounded soldiers crawling through the forest twilight, trying to reach water. “They came by the dozens and by hundreds.” Until it is revealed in the end that the child is a deaf-mute, his behavior seems insane--like war: “On and ever on they crept, these maimed and bleeding men, as heedless as he of the dramatic contrast between his laughter and their own ghastly gravity.” Both the wounded men and the child, for contrasting reasons, have “grotesque attitudes.” One soldier “lacked a lower jaw--from the upper teeth to the throat was a great red gap fringed with hanging shreds of flesh and splinters of bone.” There is a similar Goya-like image in Chapter XXII of *The Red Badge* when a sergeant’s injured jaw hangs “afar down, disclosing in the wide cavern of his mouth a pulsing mass of blood and teeth.”

Bierce uses techniques of Impressionism to render the Naturalistic themes of determinism, degradation and destruction: In the dark the wounded men are “like a swarm of great black beetles.” The fires of battle give off “a strange red light, the trunks and branches of the trees making a black lacework against it. It struck the creeping figures and gave them monstrous shadows, which caricatured their movements on the lit grass.” The child “placed himself in the lead, his wooden sword still in hand, and solemnly directed the march.” Hyperbole here is extreme, as the generals and politicians who lead men into wars are implicitly like deaf children with no understanding of what they are doing, no true concept of the horror. Bierce uses popular expressions such as “the grandeur of the struggle” and the dead who “died to make the glory” with bitter irony.

Some of the crawling wounded who reach the creek lack the strength to pull their heads out of the water. They drown while the child continues to lead the way to war, to the fires of battle that, unknown to him, are now burning his own home: "He waved his cap for their encouragement and smilingly pointed with his weapon in the direction of the guiding light--a pillar of fire to this strange exodus." In this ironic contrast to Moses leading his people to freedom in the book of *Exodus*, the deaf-mute child is leading the reader to a final horror. The child enjoys the fire--war--until he realizes that he cannot withstand its heat: "In despair he flung in his sword--a surrender to the superior forces of nature."

When he recognizes that his own home is burning, "the points of his compass were reversed." Now war is a nightmare, especially when he finds his mother dead: "The greater part of the forehead was torn away, and from the jagged hole the brain protruded, overflowing the temple, a frothy mass of gray, crowned with clusters of crimson bubbles--the work of a shell." The gore is the *objective correlative* for moral disgust with childish human beings, whose discourse is compared to "the chattering of an ape and the gobbling of a turkey." Now war is hell, the child is "soulless" and he sounds like a "devil." Yet, since mankind is a child, he is perhaps capable of moral growth, though Bierce would not bet on it.

Michael Hollister (2015)