

ANALYSIS

“The Boarded Window” (1891)

Ambrose Bierce

(1842-1914?)

The narrative first establishes a close relationship between the City and the Wilderness—“an immense and almost unbroken forest.” These archetypal spaces are evidence that this is a psychological allegory. At the same time, the story is an example of Realism in its (1) objective tone of inquiry; (2) evocation of real life; (3) focus on a representative character type; and (4) particulars of space and time--near Cincinnati in 1830 when this territory was the frontier. As it proceeds, the allegory makes the literal frontier correspond to, or symbolize, the psychological frontier between the conscious mind (City) and the unconscious (Wilderness), as in “Young Goodman Brown” by Hawthorne. The story is set where the two psychological systems intersect.

The pioneers who move the frontier westward are described as “restless souls” who attain prosperity, then abandon all to move on further west, “impelled by some mysterious impulse of their nature.” Collectively they personify the spirit of Manifest Destiny, a force of Nature. They are the cutting edge of civilization, literally, as represented by Murlock, who has cleared a few acres of ground. “He lived alone in a house of logs surrounded on all sides by the great forest, of whose gloom and silence he seemed a part.” As a Naturalist and an evolutionist, rejecting Victorian sentimentality, Bierce dramatizes how Murlock is part of the Wilderness, part of Nature--not above the natural order.

Murlock is a frontiersman, embodying the intersection between humans and wild Nature. He is the counterpart in Bierce of Cooper’s Natty Bumppo and Melville’s Queequeg. Both syllables in the name Murlock connote issues in his story: murder and lock. A *murdrum* is the killing of a human being in a secret manner. *Mur* also connotes murky, like the gloom of the forest of which he is a part, and murmur. Bierce is not pantheistic like Cooper, nor like Melville in *Moby-Dick*, he is Gothic, Naturalistic and darkly ironic in his depiction of Nature. Murlock embodies grim reality. We like and admire the heroes Natty and Queequeg and would invite them over anytime, whereas the face of Murlock would scare the kids.

In clearing ground for agriculture and a cabin, Murlock started to make the transition from frontiersman to farmer, representing the progress of civilization. Pioneers on the great plains survived the first winters by living in sod houses, virtually in the ground. Their lives were so isolated and lonely, many women went mad. Like Thoreau, but as a cynic rather than an idealist, Bierce questions the idea of progress by putting the word “improvement” in quotation marks, implying that improvement of the human lot, in general, may be impossible. This pessimism is confirmed by his plot. Murlock gives up on progress and civilization and remains a trapper rather than become a farmer, allowing “new growth” to “repair the ravage wrought by the ax.” Bierce here identifies with the mountain men and miners and other frontiersmen throughout the Old West. We are reminded that after his service in the Civil War, he was a frontiersman himself for awhile, to the extent of working on jobs in Indian Territory.

The tone becomes legendary in reference to the mystery of Murlock’s boarded window, a “true story” the narrator says he learned from his grandfather. Few know why Murlock boarded up his only window and the narrator promises to reveal “the secret.” His equivocal tone adds to the mystery: his name “was said to be” Murlock. “He was apparently seventy years old, actually about fifty.” In this story, things are not always as they appear, and the qualification “apparently” will be repeated at a critical juncture. Something happened to age him prematurely and cause him to board up his window. His face is “singularly seamed with wrinkles which appeared to belong to two intersecting systems.” His face expresses the two intersecting systems of his psyche, which correspond to the conscious and the unconscious minds.

Once a pioneer “full of hope,” Murlock was devastated by the death of his wife, “a young woman in all ways worthy of his honest devotion... Of their affection and happiness there is abundant assurance...” Their

love makes their home a “good place” in agrarian pastoral tradition, the archetypal Garden in the Wilderness of the world. When she falls ill, no physician within miles, Murlock nurses her diligently, but “she fell into unconsciousness and so passed away, apparently...” Grieving in shock, he prepares her for burial. He blunders and “did certain things incorrectly, and others which he did correctly were done over and over. His occasional failures to accomplish some simple and ordinary act filled him with astonishment, like that of a drunken man.” That he does not weep is further evidence that he is not entirely conscious, that he is partly unconscious of what he is doing. In his grief, he is dissociating his consciousness from the fact of her death. In denial, he feels that—“it must be all right, somehow. Things cannot be so bad as they seem.” *Can Such Things Be?* is the title of Bierce’s next book.

Murlock’s dissociation from the truth is imaged in “fading light,” as he does everything “mechanically, with soulless care. And still through his consciousness ran an undersense of conviction that all was right--that he should have her again as before... His heart could not contain it all, nor his imagination rightly conceive it.” The style becomes Expressionistic as Bierce excels in rendering intense emotional states and the relativity of time: “He was terrified beyond the power to cry out or move. Perforce he waited--waited there in the darkness, through seeming centuries of such dread as one may know, yet live to tell.” As in Poe, the emphasis is upon the horror generated by the plot: That his wife was not dead after all, as had been hinted previously by the cautionary word “apparently” and by the statement that he could not “rightly conceive” what has happened. Worst of all, horror beyond all horrors--*he killed her himself!* In his state of grief, Murlock neglected to *lock* the window. And he tied her wrists prematurely, based on appearance, making it impossible for her to fend off the wildcat. He feels like he murdered her.

Bierce is more ironic than Poe, and in that way more modern, or “Postmodernist.” His style is more realistic, more subtle, more restrained and more effective in evoking emotion than Poe, who is a Romantic inclined to emotive overstatement, whereas Bierce is a laconic cynic inclined to understatement. Although he discourses briefly on grief, Bierce is less prone to digression than Poe, hence more powerful in his single effect. He has a clear understanding of archetypal symbols and the intellectual capacity to relate them to each other in a realistic psychological allegory, which Poe could never do because Poe had a polarized consciousness dissociated by horror like Murlock. There is no love in Poe, no heart, whereas here in Bierce there is, for awhile at least, both love and happiness, giving this story a pathos absent from Poe.

Man as represented by Murlock is blundering, ignorant, half-unconscious and self-destructive. His intersecting psychological systems are not adequately integrated, making him a victim of his own nature. In contrast, his wife is “in all ways worthy.” She broke the ribbon with which her husband bound her wrists and despite her handicap she fought back against the beast that attacked her--she even bit a chunk from its ear. For the woman has two intersecting systems of her own, one feminine and one ferocious. Like the man she has a wilderness within, emphasized here by concluding the story with a focus on her teeth that overlays the image of the wildcat’s teeth fixed in her throat.

A window is a source of light, or truth, and a natural symbol of vision because people use it to see things. What comes into the vision of Bierce is always death, the ultimate truth. Murlock boards up his only window because his truth is too horrible for him to look at. Poe never boarded up his window. Murlock’s love for his wife and his guilt are evident in his having remained near her grave for the rest of his life. The trapper trapped himself.

Michael Hollister (2015)