

The Library of America interviews S. T. Joshi about Ambrose Bierce

In connection with the publication in September 2011 of *Ambrose Bierce: The Devil's Dictionary, Tales, & Memoirs*, edited by S. T. Joshi, Rich Kelley conducted this exclusive interview for The Library of America e-Newsletter.

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Why should anyone read Ambrose Bierce today? What is his contribution to American literature?

In the realm of horror or supernatural literature, Bierce occupies an honored place: he is the most notable American writer in the field between Edgar Allan Poe and H. P. Lovecraft, and his influence has been immense. But Bierce was chiefly a satirist, and all his work—short stories, journalism, poetry, and *The Devil's Dictionary*—was written under the satirical impulse. He may well be the greatest satirist America has ever produced, and in this regard can take his place with such figures as Juvenal, Swift, and Voltaire.

As a writer who dealt with war and its variegated effects, Bierce was a demonstrable influence on Stephen Crane, Ernest Hemingway, and many others. And as a journalist Bierce has no rival in American literature save H. L. Mencken. As to why we should read Bierce today: we can learn much of what it was like to be a soldier in the Civil War; we can be terrified by his tales of supernatural and psychological horror; and we can gain a refreshing skepticism regarding our species' motives and foibles by sampling his unrelentingly cheerless view of human folly and hypocrisy.

Bierce was not quite twenty when, a week after the firing on Fort Sumter, he enlisted in the Union army in Indiana. He saw considerable action over the next four years, fighting at Shiloh and Chickamauga, taking a bullet to the head at Kennesaw Mountain, and being captured by and escaping from the Confederates in 1864. He wrote about his experiences decades later, sometimes as essays, sometimes as fiction. Many consider these

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pieces, as H. L. Mencken put it, “some of the best war stories ever written.” What distinguishes Bierce’s war writings?

Bierce’s war stories are indeed based on first-hand experience, and Bierce himself took pride in that fact; but beyond that, these tales convey the widely varying emotions felt by common soldiers—terror, panic, heroism, tedium, self-preservation—in an absolutely detached and unsentimental manner. The grim paradoxes that were peculiar to the Civil War—where brother turned against brother, where soldiers were ordered to kill their fellow-countrymen and destroy property not in a foreign field but in their own land—are rendered particularly vivid in such Bierce’s tales as “A Horseman in the Sky” and “An Affair of Outposts.”

Eight of the eleven “Bits of Autobiography” included in this volume deal with Bierce’s war experiences. What aspects of war do these essays get at that his stories don’t?

There is a tone of pensive, elegiac melancholy in these essays that one doesn’t find in any of Bierce’s other work. It is clear not only that his Civil War experiences affected him deeply, but that he reflected on many of these experiences for the whole of his life. Bierce was always insistent on the radical distinction between the “soldier” and the “civilian,” and he felt that the latter could never fully understand what the former had gone through. Some scholars think that “What I Saw of Shiloh” is the single best piece Bierce ever wrote, and I am inclined to agree. The final paragraph brings tears to my eyes. Bierce seems to have felt that in writing about himself he could express—and evoke—more emotions than he chose to do in his fiction, which is written with a certain emotional restraint that precludes even the slightest hint of sentimentality. Some of the later essays in “Bits of Autobiography” are light-heartedly comical in ways one almost never finds in the dark satire that is typical of his writing.

In his far-ranging study of the literature of the Civil War, Patriotic Gore, Edmund Wilson suggests that characterization was a weakness for Bierce and that “Death may perhaps be said to be Ambrose Bierce’s only real character.” H. L. Mencken, on the other hand, wrote that Bierce had a “far firmer grasp upon character” and was “more observant” than Edgar Allan Poe. Where do you stand on this argument?

There is something to be said for both views. Wilson claimed that Death was Bierce’s only character, and he seems to have meant this in disparagement;

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but I think Bierce was aware that Death was a wondrously complex phenomenon that could be treated in countless ways and endless variations. (It is of interest that there is no *Devil's Dictionary* entry for "Death"; there is one for "Dead," but it is nothing but a brief quatrain.) Both Poe and Bierce had a keen insight into relatively limited aspects of human psychology—especially the psychology of fear. But Poe expressed that insight in prose of flamboyant artificiality, whereas Bierce adopted an almost skeletal spareness of diction. Both methods can be effective in their own ways: there is as much genuine terror in Bierce's "The Man and the Snake" or "The Middle Toe of the Right Foot" as there is in Poe's "Ligeia" or "The Fall of the House of Usher."

Bierce didn't start writing until, at twenty-five, he moved to San Francisco. Except for a three-year stint in London, the Bay area was his home for the next thirty years. How did living in California as it was being born affect his writing? Should we consider him a California writer?

Bierce would have preferred to remain in England, since many of his literary influences (most notably Jonathan Swift) were English, but his wife urged him to return to San Francisco in 1875. As his literary career evolved, Bierce became a full-fledged Californian, portraying with imperishable skill the eeriness of the deserted mining towns of the Sierra foothills and the chaotic mix of wealth and poverty that was *fin de siècle* San Francisco. He was so traumatized by the destruction of his adopted city in the 1906 earthquake and fire (even though, by that time, he had moved to Washington, D.C.) that he did not think he could ever revisit the place; but in fact he returned for lengthy trips in the summers of 1910 and 1912. A tale like "The Death of Halpin Frayser" can be read as much for its local color (it is set in the Napa valley) as for its supernatural shudders.

Critics have argued over whether psychological or supernatural explanations best resolve the endings to Bierce's stories. In your essay on Bierce in The Weird Tale you write that "Bierce's importance in weird fiction rests upon his role as a satiric horror writer." Can you explain what you mean by "satiric horror"?

The French critic Maurice Lévy once stated that Bierce sought to inspire terror "by hatred." To some degree this is an exaggeration, relying on the customary misconception of Bierce as a ferocious misanthrope, but there is a core of truth to the remark. Bierce had a very low opinion of humanity, and his

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horror tales are in many ways natural extensions of the satirical sketches and squibs he had been writing from the beginning of his career. Satiric horror employs the tools of satire—irony, cynicism, repartée, and, yes, even a touch of misanthropy—to evoke fear. This is why even many of his Civil War tales can be considered tales of psychological horror: the hapless Peyton Farquhar of “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” is frequently the butt of highly pungent and cynical remarks by the omniscient narrator as he struggles in his mind to escape death by hanging.

Bierce started creating the entries for what would become The Devil’s Dictionary in 1869 and he didn’t complete it until he revised it for his Collected Works in 1911. Did the nature of the entries change over those forty years? H. L. Mencken wrote that this little book contains “some of the most gorgeous witticisms in the English language” and “some of the most devastating epigrams ever written.” Mencken’s favorites included “Opportunity: a favorable occasion for grasping a disappointment.” What accounts for this book’s popularity? Do you have any favorite entries?

Bierce refined his satirical skills over the decades so that he was able to pack the biggest wallop into the smallest space. His classic definition of “Alone” (“In bad company.”) is an example. My favorite definition is that for “Cynic,” where Bierce was clearly thinking of himself: “A blackguard whose faulty vision sees things as they are, not as they ought to be.”

It’s amusing to note that Bierce’s original publisher (Doubleday, Page) vetoed Bierce’s own preferred title and used *The Cynic’s Word Book* for the 1906 edition. Bierce remarked wryly in a letter: “Here in the East the Devil is a sacred personage (the Fourth Person of the Trinity, as an Irishman might say) and his name must not be taken in vain.”

Bierce wrote numerous essays, stories, epigrams, and poems, but never a novel. In fact, he had a decided distaste for novels. Why was that?

Bierce somewhat mechanically adopted Edgar Allan Poe’s belief that the “long poem” was an aesthetic impossibility, saying much the same thing about the novel. Was this a matter of making a virtue of necessity? Was Bierce simply incapable of sustaining a prose narrative to novel length? We have no way of knowing that, but it is true that Bierce chose to work in miniature—the dictionary entry, the fable, the short story, the satirical sketch. The great majority of his poems are short, and some of them are mere quatrains or couplets. (My

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favorite couplet is the poem “The Discoverers,” whose subject is himself: “My! how my fame rings out in every zone— / A thousand critics shouting: ‘He’s unknown!’”) Bierce valued literary *concentration*: packing the maximum amount of emotive power into the smallest space. He felt that such a methodology would have the greatest impact on his readers, and that the novel’s somewhat looser structure resulted in a correspondingly weaker or more diluted impression. I am not at all convinced that he was wrong in this.

Bierce is probably one of the best-known misanthropes in American literature. Where does this reputation come from? H. L. Mencken seems to have known him pretty well and said that he had “never encountered a more thorough-going cynic than Bierce,” calling him “the most gruesome of men.” His publisher Walter Neale said he had never seen Bierce laugh. What was he like in person?

I’ve suggested before that the standard view of Bierce as an unrelenting misanthrope is something of a caricature. Bierce repeatedly stated that he did not hate human beings uniformly. To one critic who claimed that he did, he wrote: “Does it really seem to you that contempt for the bad is incompatible with respect for the good?—that hatred of rogues and fools does not imply love of bright and honest folk?” Bierce may have felt that the world was largely populated by rogues and fools, but he singled out a few individuals of his acquaintance for his love and benevolence. He actually engaged in delightfully flirtatious correspondences with a number of women friends. It would be more accurate to say that Bierce, while not *hating* humanity, was repeatedly *disappointed* by it. But like Mark Twain, he seems to have become increasingly embittered in his final years, so that he cast off many of his friends and colleagues and then, apparently out of boredom, departed for Mexico. Whether this was a deliberate or even half-conscious suicide pact is something we will never know.

Bierce may be as famous for the mysterious circumstances of the end of his life as for any of his works. As the volume’s chronology records, in 1913 the adventurous seventy-one-year-old finishes a tour of Civil War battlefields and leaves New Orleans to make a trip “into northern Mexico before returning to Texas, then crosses the border again. Writes letter from Chihuahua on December 26, concluding ‘I leave here tomorrow for an unknown destination’; he is not heard from again, and his fate remains unknown.” Has any new information emerged in recent years to explain what happened?

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What's your best guess?

Some Bierce scholars have done very interesting work on Bierce's final days, examining the accounts of newspaper reporters and other individuals who may have met Bierce in Texas and Mexico. The best guess, I believe, is that Bierce perished in the battle of Ojinaga, in northern Mexico, in early 1914. There is even a gravesite there that *might* be Bierce's final resting place. Whether the remains in that gravesite can ever definitively be identified as Bierce's is a matter of doubt, but the fact that there are no reliable accounts of his continued existence beyond early 1914—he was, after all, a public figure, and could not have escaped notice by the many reporters covering the Mexican Revolution—makes it evident that he died fairly soon after he crossed the border.

In the Note on the Texts you write that over the three years that Bierce published the twelve volumes of his Collected Works he extensively reworked and reorganized his writings and this volume reflects those changes. The notes detail how he reorganized them. Can you offer some examples of his revisions? Were his changes always improvements?

Like Poe, Bierce seized upon nearly every reprint of a given work to revise it in some fashion or other. The end result, as far as his stories are concerned, is an increasing concision and, interestingly, an increasing (and obviously deliberate) vagueness about their temporal and geographical setting. In the original publication of "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," the first line mentions the date of the story's events—"One morning in the summer of 1862"—but this detail was omitted in the final version of 1910. What Bierce was aiming for, in these and other instances, was to enhance the timelessness of his narratives, so that the reader could focus less on their historical specifics and more on the human drama they expound. It will always be a matter of individual taste whether one cares for this kind of pruning or not, but we have to respect Bierce's final wishes, as embodied in the *Collected Works*.

You've edited several collections of Bierce's works. When did you first discover him and how did you become so engaged in studying his work? Did putting together this volume lead to any new discoveries? Which are your favorite pieces?

I'd always been interested in Bierce as a writer of horror tales, and I probably read him as early as my late teenage years. For years thereafter, I enjoyed

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Bierce's short stories but did little in exploring the wealth of other work he wrote—indeed, I was probably not even aware of much of this work. Then, in the mid-1990s, I became interested in the California poet George Sterling (1869–1926), and was intrigued that he had engaged in a long correspondence with Bierce, who was his mentor. While working on an edition of this correspondence (still unpublished), I became so fascinated with Bierce himself that I quickly began amassing all his work, including his immense quantities of journalism. In conjunction with my colleague David E. Schultz, I have transcribed nearly the entirety of Bierce's published work—about 6 million words—as well as a half-million words of his extant letters. I now find Bierce even more interesting as a journalist and commentator on his times than as a fiction writer, although I still maintain a high regard for his fiction. I don't know that the compilation of this present volume led to any new discoveries, but there was a certain amount of anguish in determining what should or should not go into the book. I hope that a second volume can appear someday, featuring his journalism, his fables (there are more than 800 of them), the best of his poetry, and his humorous/satirical writing. Such a volume would present, perhaps, an even more all-encompassing view of Bierce as a literary figure than the present volume does. As for favorite pieces, I have long been tickled by his “future histories,” represented in this volume by the long story “Ashes of the Beacon” and a few others. I don't know of anything quite like them—they seem to be pioneering examples of yet another new subgenre, “satiric science fiction”!

In the article I referred to earlier from [The Weird Tale](#) you said that Bierce began and closed a genre, that “he has no successors.” That was in 1990. Is that still true? Why has no one been able or tried to imitate Bierce?

I perhaps engaged in some flamboyant exaggeration when I made that remark. One can point to several British and American writers in the generations after Bierce who employed roughly his methods of satirical horror: Saki (H. H. Munro), L. P. Hartley, John Collier, Roald Dahl, and perhaps Bierce's most distinguished successor, Shirley Jackson. Whether any of these authors were *directly* influenced by Bierce is an open question, but they all adopted that jaundiced view of human foibles that distinguishes Bierce's thought and writings.

I was surprised to come across a 2003 “graphic classic” [Ambrose Bierce](#) that featured interpretations of some of Bierce's war and horror stories—and a speculative piece about his death—by a number of great contempo-

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rary illustrators: Rick Geary, Milton Knight, Skip Williamson, Gahan Wilson, among many others. You wrote the introduction. What is it about these writings from more than a hundred years ago that appealed to these artists?

Bierce was remarkably explicit, for his time, in his display of the horrific and the grisly. His satirical streak had something to do with that. Lovecraft referred to the “inhumanity” in some of Bierce’s tales—such as the pungent subtitle “A Man Though Naked May Be in Rags” (referring to a hideously mutilated corpse) in “The Damned Thing.” This sort of thing was quite shocking to the readers of his day and anticipates much modern horror writing (and film), where almost nothing is left to the imagination in terms of blood and gore. Bierce, of course, exercised far greater artistic skill than many of today’s writers and filmmakers, but because his work is, in this regard, quite ahead of its time, it touches a chord with today’s readers and with artists.