

Horror design in Ambrose Bierce's war stories: fantasy or realism?

From Benjamin Franklin onwards, the dominant trend of American Literature has been towards optimism. Authors such as Emerson, Whitman, William James and John Dewey have, in general, believed in man, though they have sometimes satirized society. However, there has also, along with it a narrower current, been the shadow of pessimism, which dates from Hawthorne, through the symbolisms of Poe, and Melville, to Stephen Crane, Ring Lardner, and, of course, the plain and bitter Bierce.

Bierce's personal life was a series of disasters. He was not a very sociable man, and different familiar tragedies repeated all through his life: failures, abandonment, the early deaths of his sons, and a constant condition of pessimism, cynicism, nihilism, and the gallows humor, through which he created his best works, especially *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians* (1891; later re-titled *In the Midst of Life*), where he transformed the experience of man at war into some perfect moments of dramatic fiction. In fact, the American Civil War was perhaps the most important experience for him, and he drew his best narrative passages from it. He enlisted as a volunteer with the Union Army shortly after the war broke out. The Civil War experience represented the primary source of his direct and shocking works, "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," "Chickamauga," and "One of the Missing."

While studying Bierce's literary development, one should stop at his journalistic career in the *San Francisco Sunday Examiner* and others during the 70s and 80s, for this gave him the skilful style that was to have a great impact in his short-stories about the war. Like Poe, Bierce also preferred the short-story over the "short story padded" novel, and its abbreviated form for its totality of effect. His technique of creating suspense toward a dramatic crisis is also modelled on Poe's, though Bierce's horrors are more realistic. Moreover, we should say that Bierce's heroic obsession was not the grandeur of the Civil War, but its impact on the individual consciousness. Quite convincingly, Eric Solomon (1982) says that –along with Crane and Kipling- Bierce's treatment of war is the most extensive in English and American fiction: "He catches war at his sources and makes an intensification of personal experience [...] He manages to evoke the feeling of reality, a sense of fact and place that makes war not an abstract moral condition but a concrete physical actuality"(185).

In this paper we will try to demonstrate that some of Bierce's war short-stories can be read as realistic-fantastic horror stories, namely "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," "Chickamauga," and "One of the Missing." This is mainly carried out through the skilful use of literary technique, which Bierce develops in order to provide his stories with a dream-like structure. The first point we

will analyse is the reader's vacillation that Todorov (1972) claimed to be an essential feature of fantastic literature: a vacillation that goes from the complete explanation of the facts of the story as something rational, to the doubt that arises as to whether supernatural elements are involved. Bierce achieves this either by means of interchanging the diverse narrators throughout one story, or by making a certain paradoxical effect which gives way to ambiguity; all this is controlled by the idea of the *suspension of disbelief*, which in turn depends on its appearance from some areas of non-codification. These *vacuum* areas of non-codification represent the gaps which readers complete with their own personal horrific/terrifying effects. There are always two texts for readers to follow within one fantastic story: the intellectual mind tells them of the events of the story and leaving them a rational explanation they can think of; the other is the emotional side, which is much more complex, because it has to do not only with the plot or the actors in the story, but also with the background, mood and feelings the reader experiences whilst reading the story.

Bierce is much helped by his journalistic technique, which gives his stories both the realism of the news genre and the *vraisemblance* of the facts told. As Gary Hoppenstand (1995) said, "The manner in which Bierce frequently narrated his macabre tales implied a type of journalistic technique, in which Bierce's narrator tended to explain fantastic events in the simplified, straightforward language of the newspaper reporter"(225). Like Poe, he was a romantic in the depths of his heart, but he also took part in the realistic trend of the end of the XIX century and his technique developed toward a Cranesque impressionism, which made his characters vacillate about their role in the universe, as well as the lack of preoccupation of this universe toward them: subjective feelings and perceptive views alternate in his narrators and characters with the objective reality of the facts.

Bierce's technique in his "horror war stories" spans a divide between the lack of dialogue and an absence of geographic and personal details, and the irony he adds to his narrative. In the end, readers experience a nightmarish feeling of ironic terror: ironic because it is understated, terrifying because of the facts and the tragic consequences where the events of the stories lead us to. However, before talking about each story, let's take a quick look at Bierce's technique, which will be later exemplified particularly in three of his short stories about the Civil War.

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According to Ignacio Domingo Baguer (1994), in order to enjoy emotions of horror in literature and other artistic manifestations, we need to be sure that nothing is really going to happen to us; therefore we must define an area of non-codification (no significance). This area allows us to enjoy the fictitious reading in the climactic moments, because it will maintain our interest in the narrative. We agree with Domingo in his opinion that we do not become frightened by what we read or see,

but by what we *think* we may see or read. From this perspective, horror is rooted in our inherited cultural background as well as the deep mental structures of human perception. This is the reason why Bierce's narrators self-consciously conceal vital details of information, in order to prepare - regardless of questions of probability- the reader for the final assault on him, to achieve the maximum effect of surprise.¹ Besides, we assume that fantastic stories, and especially horror tales, need to provoke a feeling of doubt in the reader, and this concealing contrives to the same goal.

The ironical effect of terror is achieved by first allowing the protagonist to be aware of the hazardous situation, which arouses an emotion of fear, even terror or madness. Later, this situation leads to a hyperbolic heightening of sensory perceptions, which, in turn, affects the subjective perception of space and, above all, of time in the protagonist. M. E. Grenander (1982) distinguishes two groups of tales of ironical terror in Bierce's work: "those in which the actual situation is harmful, with the protagonist conceiving it to be harmless and reacting accordingly; and those in which the actual situation is harmless, with the protagonist conceiving it to be harmful and reacting accordingly"(213). Therefore, unlike in "Chickamauga," where readers are always conscious of the objective reality of events happening in the story, in "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," and "One of the Missing" we are not completely aware of the true circumstances affecting the protagonist until the end of the story. Solomon (1982) notes the use of pathetic fallacy as another device that Bierce uses to strengthen this feeling of the dehumanisation of man, as well as the depiction of violent imagery. Finally, the fact that Bierce's people involved in war are generally in the hands of another's volition, also contributes to heighten the feeling of "deception" in his readers.

It is true that in fantastic literature, we must create a stronger literary illusion than in most realistic genres, as the fantastic and the horrible are bound to be disbelieved rather than the ordinary and the usual. Therefore, horror stories such as Bierce's, usually deploy narrators involved in the story. The profusion of details in Poe and Lovecraft help create a suitable mood for the horror stories, whereas the terseness and lack of detail of Bierce's stories is supplied by the use of authorial statements, which contribute to create an atmosphere of verisimilitude, because of their similarity in style to newspaper accounts. Sometimes the "writer embodies a tension between believability and truth found in all horror fiction, giving his truthful story to the newspapers as a fiction, then giving that fiction to the inquest as factual evidence. The story is both truthful and fictional, believable as fiction but incredible as reality"(Wheeler 11-12). But We will analyse all these ideas in the next sections, where we will try to demonstrate that Bierce's war stories can be appropriately considered as pertaining to the fantastic, and especially the sub-genre of horror/terror.²

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In the case of the body of a man being hanged, the term, for a period of fifteen minutes, essentially describes a body moving across the transition zone between life and death. Farquhar does not quite graphically experience all the physical symptoms of a well-executed hanging, but Bierce only describes them as they appear an internal unfolding of the optimistic thoughts that had “flashed into the doomed man’s brain” only moments before the fatal drop.³ (Blume 152)

In “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge,” the reader is somewhat forced to take part in the confusion between reason and imagination, for he really perceives the final events only at the end of the story. The perspective of the narrator changes from a limited point of view at first, to an omniscient one, only to be reversed again to a limited one, this time Farquhar’s point of view. Our narrator no longer confines his description to the surface of things, but he is now omniscient and describes Peyton Farquhar’s feelings in almost scientific terminology as if he were explaining the mechanical operation of a clock. The reader perceives the content of experience, as it is flashed into the doomed man’s brain, as a legitimate historical account that has duration and extends through time since the distinction between public clock time and private lived time is no longer available. All this means that the Todorovian vacillation of the reader should be produced here from the very beginning till almost the last line of the story. For the creation of this vacillation, Bierce is helped by the process of depersonalisation that confounds men with things, and that he uses, like Poe did before and Crane later, which also contributed in conveying an impressionistic sense of sub-humanity and insignificance to the whole narration.

Time perception also changes, considering an objective time versus a subjective one, which is impressed in the shocked mind of the protagonist, Peyton Farquhar. It is as if we are scientifically observing a man in an abnormal state of consciousness, but at once believing in the perceptions that he experiences.⁴ This is why we can read the different points of view of the protagonist about the water stream under the bridge as “swift”(Bierce 1998, 327) or “sluggish”(Bierce 1998, 328), and time becomes relative and even vertiginous, the span of a second dilating to twenty-four hours, and reveals ever increasing interior units, ever repeating the division process: “swung through unthinkable arcs of oscillation, like a vast pendulum”(Bierce 1998, 330).

This ambiguity, as Clifford R. Ames (1987) writes, is underlined by the use of qualifying phrases which denote subjectivity, such as “seemed,” “appeared to” (Bierce 1998, 330), and these in turn are neutralised by the exactness of measurement. On the other hand, Peter Stoicheff (1993) coincides with Ames (1987) in the observation that Bierce is also posing questions about the epistemology of our knowledge, in the sense that we, as readers, ask ourselves who is experiencing these abnormally sharp perceptions, which go from the improbable in “the prismatic colors in all the dewdrops upon a

million blades of grass”(Bierce 1998, 331); passing by the impossible, when he even sees through the rifle, sights the eye of the man on the bridge, and hears “the humming of the gnats that danced above the eddies of the stream, the beating of the dragon-flies’ wings, the strokes of the water-spiders’ legs”(Bierce 1998, 331); to the unreal, when the familiar and the orderly dominate the psychic landscape as hope guides the memory in creating an escape scene illuminated by idyllic “roseate light,” and the “music of aeolian harps”(Bierce 1998, 333).

As in *Coleridgean* “suspension of disbelief,” we readers are made, until the end, to vacillate between the emotional side, which tells us that the escape is real, and the rational cognition that we know it is not, because –as F. J. Logan claims (1982)- “Bierce pairs unanswerable philosophical logic with the implacable logic of natural law. The logic tells us that we are participating in a hallucination, and that whatever else the reality behind the hallucination may be, it is not tragedy”(207). We could say that Bierce uses –like Poe did- a nightmarish model as structure for his story by which the reader is isolated, victimized, and buried with the protagonist of the story. Something that we can also relate to the uncanny Freudian description of unconscious reality:

Because the linguistic signposts of historical time have been removed, and because the reader now operates in the same cause-and-effect, space-time frame as the protagonist, he experiences the sensations, thoughts and feelings of Farquhar’s dream state directly as his own experience. As a result, he moves eagerly with Peyton toward the symbolic embrace, and at the instant when the dream state collapses into the painful reality of historical time and consequence, he not only feels the blow of intense disappointment and the shock of frustrated expectation, but also the staggering recognition that can come only at the point where experience ends: the recognition that Farquhar’s delusion has been the reader’s own, and that the subjective experience they have shared has somehow entered the pure present at the moment of death. (Ames 53)

Bierce’s skill stems from his ability to convey Farquhar’s subjective experience and make it seem credible, like an escape in progress, while at the same time maintaining the dreamlike quality of the events. In the end, the reader is –in David R. Saliba’s (1990) words- “prematurely buried”: here he will be hanged with the protagonist.⁵

Because the story’s satiric content requires it, and because the story’s development demands it, we agree with Logan (1982) that the short-story ending is justified, validated, expressive, and functional, though it is, in a way, more modern than Poe’s in that it is expressed both in the beginning and throughout. “Occurrence” would not only refer to a physical event in which the bridge plays a significant part, but also to something that suggests the reader’s journey off into the

psychology of a condemned man as he struggles to deny time and reality just moments before his death. For Stoicheff (1993), this dream-within-a-dream quality of the story may be extended to its logical culmination of birth, in a kind of psychoanalytical *womb-tomb* cycling relationship, generated by Farquhar's rising to the surface of the creek: the "disobedient hands" of the infant "forced him to the surface"(Bierce 1998, 331) and he "felt his head emerge; his eyes were blinded by the sunlight; his chest expanded convulsively, and with a supreme and crowning agony his lungs engulfed a great draught of air, which instantly he expelled in a shriek!"(Bierce 1998, 331).

In "Owl Creek Bridge," Bierce keeps his loyalty to his journalistic style by providing a minimum of character description: it is for the reader to "set his characters in their proper military context, as captain or private, cavalryman or infantryman"(Solomon 184). Finally, we could describe this short-story as a combination of an ironic manipulation of the reader and a stylistic conciseness to express human self-deception, leading to a startling denouement: Bierce's way to tell us that the hero's death or survival is noble and significant, but we should always oppose war, especially Civil War, as a means to solve the conflicts.⁶

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"I cannot look over a landscape without noting the advantages of a ground for attack or defense [...] I never hear a rifle-shot without a thrill in my veins. I never catch the odor of gunpowder without having visions of the dead and dying"(Bierce).⁷ Bierces's biographers declare that war was a central experience for him; a paradoxical experience by which he had something to hold onto while he was growing older. Chickamauga, was the setting of one of his most macabre and powerful tales, but still he always remembered it as a period of innocence and youth: "It is not strange that the phantom of a blood-stained period have so airy a grace and look with so tender eyes? –that I recall with difficulty the danger and death and horrors of the time, and without effort all that was gracious and picturesque?"(Bierce 1994, cited in Aaron 176). The Civil War made Bierce a veteran, as later were the Vietnam veterans, frightened by the killing business, whose soldierly values were to be rejected by most Americans right after the fight.

In "Chickamauga," we read about the dream of a little boy who savagely destroys his enemies, until he is suddenly terrified by a rabbit -ironically the least frightening of beasts. His first shock against reality comes when he learns of his own inferiority in the hands of nature's indifference, so that he gives up his romantic dreams of military conquest. The romantic vision of war died when the sword went into the fire. Bierce employs irony to present us the child's mother's disgusting and dismembered corpse, but the last turn of the screw is the fact that the boy is a deaf-mute, and that he is ignorant of reality until the end, this ignorance being, no doubt, an element which makes him a

victim of fate –as Anthony Sean Carroll (2003) remarks also in Guy de Maupassant’s “The Madwoman.” Both Bierce and Maupassant prove their skilfulness when they oppose the dreadful reality of the momentum into another reality, which is also a part of life at that same stage of history. The main characters in both stories lie back and receive the blow from reality, they don’t interact with it. They are both strangers in their own world: “He uttered a series of inarticulate and indescribable cries –something between the chattering of an ape and the gobbling of a turkey- a startling, soulless, unholy sound, the language of a devil. The child was a deaf mute”(Bierce 1994, 23). The feeling we have when an animal is beaten to death, without any reason. Love is blind, but so is cruelty. Both lose the little love that was in the world for them. Despite the overwhelming final shock, we learn that “only personal experience can wipe out the false impression and teach the essentials of war”(Solomon 194).

After the war, Bierce was actually worried about both the physical and emotional consequences of the brutal exposure to pain and death: the reactions of men in the stress of battle. Controversial and very strange reactions, such as Farquhar’s thinking on his way home and the boy in “Chickamauga” having fun while playing over the poor wounded and dead in the battle “heedless as he of the dramatic contrast between his laughter and their own ghastly gravity”(Bierce 1994, 21). Also, unlike Farquhar’s especially acute senses in “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” and Searing’s in “One of the Missing,” here the deaf-mute child has sub-normally dull senses: “all unheard by him were the roar of the musketry, the shock of the cannon, ‘the thunder of the captains and the shouting’”(Bierce 1994, 22). As Carroll (2003) states, the child’s journey leads him into doubt –after stealing from him the “safe home” of naive ignorance- and introduces him to the brutality of the real world, but it doesn’t give him wisdom, leaving him speechless and lost. He doesn’t understand the surrounding reality, so that only we, readers, are the ones that vicariously profit from his misfortune, because we learn from his ignorance. The climax of the story takes place in the wilderness, conjuring up the unknown: a perfect location to withdraw characters from their infant safety.

Bierce’s ending plays one trick on the child and another on the reader, who -like the child- suddenly realizes that his supposed privileged position has been a delusion, for he acknowledges that certain crucial information has been concealed to him. Andrew Wheeler (1990) remarks, that Bierce uses objects to strengthen the credibility in the reader, obtained somewhat by the narrator during the weird events, which would conclusively prove that those events were actually happening. Even though –as Logan (1982) defends- Bierce detested “bad readers –readers who, lacking the habit of analysis, lack also the faculty of discrimination, and take whatever is put before them, with the broad, blind catholicity of a slop-fed conscience or a parlor pig”(196), it is also true that unlike in the other two stories, in “Chickamauga” we scholarly readers are not quite aware of the narrator’s

manipulation of point of view; hence, at the end, we miss the surprise element; but, on the other hand, we understand mood, that is, the constant and powerful *in crescendo* effect of emotion.

We agree with Carroll (2003) that at the end of the story, we feel guilty for not being capable of changing our living out a cruel reality that allows these stories to be part of the news on television, and not only a tale: “[the child] moved his little hands, making wild, uncertain gestures. He uttered a series of inarticulate and indescribable cries –something between the chattering of an ape and the gobbling of a turkey- [...] Then he stood motionless, with quivering lips, looking down upon the wreck”(Bierce 1994, 23). On the other hand, through the enormous power of fire, Bierce transmits the reader a feeling of surrender to sadness and fate: “The fire beyond the belt of woods on the farther side of the creek, reflected to earth from the canopy of its own smoke, was now suffusing the whole landscape”(Bierce 1994, 22).

At the end of his life, a philosophical despair took power over Bierce, which transformed his pessimism into universal law. So though it is difficult to understand, we find a man that hates war, criticises it, depicts it as hell on earth, but considers there is a reason to fight in it: “new sense of freedom from control, happy in the opportunity of exploration and adventure; for this child’s spirit [...] victories in battles whose critical moments were centuries, whose victors’ camps were cities of hewn stone”(Bierce 1994, 18). The vacillation between illusion and reality is a constant in Bierce’s war stories; however he never loses sight of the absurdity and the shocking aspect of the battle. Despite his insistence on rejecting the function of literature as serving a practical purpose or criticizing any human aspect, his fierce depiction of the battle foreshadows a modern reaction against war, through his exceptionally skilful and never equalled war tales.

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Bierce believed that there is something which is real: Truth. Truth is what happens, whether it appears to be a mere coincidence or not. There is an order to the laws of the universe, for what we call accident, according to Bierce, is “an inevitable occurrence due to the action of immutable laws,”⁸ which are above man’s ability to comprehend and explain in terms of predictability, possibility, or probability. (Bahr 151)

In “One of the Missing,” the protagonist, Jerome Searing, is persuaded that there is a loaded rifle, set on a hair-trigger and pointed directly at his forehead, which he will set in motion if he dares make the slightest move. He protagonist reacts emotionally to what he thinks is an extremely hazardous situation. Searing proves his courage when he creeps forward on his scouting expedition, “his pulse was as regular, his nerves were as steady as if he were trying to trap a sparrow”(Bierce 1994, 31).

Then he notices the rifle pointed at his head and remembers he left it cocked: “Looking with the right eye, the weapon seemed to be directed at a point to the left of his head [...] affected with a feeling of uneasiness. But that was as far as possible from fear”(Bierce 1994, 35). When he closes his eyes, a dull ache in his forehead starts to give him a serious pain, though it goes away as soon as he opens his eyes. His fear increases toward terror, to the point of lapsing into unconsciousness and delirium, as he stares at the gun barrel, and the pain in his forehead becomes insufferable: “Jerome Searing, the man of courage, the formidable enemy, the strong, resolute warrior, was as pale as a ghost. His jaw was fallen; [...] a cold sweat bathed his entire body; he screamed with fear. He was not insane –he was terrified”(Bierce 1994, 38).

However, “in order to sustain the distance from his characters necessary for the ironic detachment he seeks, Bierce employs an imagery that shows contempt for men and admiration for guns –the reverse of his actual feeling”(Solomon 190), in a kind of reverse psychology: “His rifle, an ordinary ‘Springfield’, but fitted with a globe sight and hair-trigger –would easily send its ounce and a quarter of lead hissing their minds. That would not affect the result of the war, but it is the business of a soldier to kill. It is also his habit if he is a good soldier”(Bierce 1994, 32).⁹ However -as Howard W. Bahr (1982) states- Bierce had a tendency to keep dialogue at a minimum, because his concept of short story was that it should be mainly the account of an individual psychologically reacting to a situation. In “One of the Missing” as in most war stories, Bierce is merely concerned with a surface sense of localization or “acclivity” for his military accounts. As in Crane’s stories, Bierce’s landscapes are, at times, indifferent; at others, deliberately contrasted to the ugliness of the events it shelters: “The forest extended without a break toward the front, so solemn and silent that only by an effort of the imagination could it be conceived as populous with armed men, alert and vigilant –a forest formidable with possibilities of battle”(Bierce 1994, 30-31).

While “An Occurrence at Owl Creek,” in which Farquhar innocently thinks he has made a miraculous last minute escape from being hanged, and “Chickamauga,” where the child believes that the group of bleeding soldiers he comes upon is a “merry spectacle,” reminding him “of the painted clown whom he had seen last summer in the circus”(Bierce 1994, 21); “One of the Missing,” along with “One Officer, One Man” and “The Man and the Snake” belong to Grenander’s second group of tales, where the technique of ironic terror is reversed: “A basically harmless (or at least, not very harmful) situation is misinterpreted as an extremely perilous one; the protagonist has all the emotional reactions which would be appropriate to a situation of terrible danger, and the story concludes with his death”(Grenander 214). The consequence is that all three men die of fright: Brayton and Searing from sheer panic; Graffenreid commits suicide because he cannot stand his nervous disorder, though ironically their terror and pain was for each of them needless.

In both groups of stories, -as we have already seen in “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” and “Chickamauga”- the protagonists react with unusually acute physical sensations. Searing “had not before observed how light and feathery they [the tops of the distant trees] were, nor how darkly blue the sky was, even among their branches, where they somewhat paled it with their green; [...] the singing of birds, the strange metallic note of the meadow lark suggesting the clash of vibrant blades”(Bierce 1994, 36). As in other stories, space shortens and time decelerates, with the result of a man being overwhelmed by his own confusion of sensations: “No thought of home, of wife and children, of country of glory. The whole record of memory was effaced. The world had passed away –not a vestige remained. Here in this confusion of timbers and boards is the sole universe. Here is immortality in time –each pain an everlasting life”(Bierce 1994, 38). Also, as Solomon (1982) states, in “One of the Missing” we can note “a double irony: the scout seems to be dead for a week, and the watch indicates that only twelve minutes have passed. This would seem overly contrived in most settings, but it doesn’t seem so out of place in war”(188).

Another important point of coincidence of the three stories is Bierce’s literary technique, by which, on the one hand, the journalistic style helps the narrator explain fantastic events in the easy and direct language of a newspaper reporter; while on the other, he frequently produces *underdetermination* by straightly addressing the reader, to offer the other side of the argument of belief and, therefore, forcing the decision onto him.¹⁰ As for the ending in Bierce’s stories, in “One of the Missing,” the author presents it to the reader, not as a spectacular final surprise as in Poe’s and Lovecraft’s tales, but rather as a long-anticipated *convincer*.¹¹ Thus in "One of the Missing," a Salibeian *premature burial* both for the protagonist and especially for the reader becomes a war casualty, revealing as in the other two tales analyzed, a completely modern interest in the understanding of abnormal states of consciousness. As in “Chickamauga” and “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge,” in “One of the Missing” we experience an ironic turn of the screw of terror.

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Today, Bierce’s critics confer upon his short-story an unequal evaluation. Bierce never cared to learn how to profit from his talent. During his lifetime, his fame never reached a high peak, except around San Francisco, and he only started to be really appreciated right after his disappearance in 1914. Readers have always focussed more on his legend than in his literary career; and this because we, the readers, tend to become fascinated by the supernatural, and also because Bierce had a certain *fin de siècle* aura, by which he was considered an *épateur* of the then flourishing American bourgeoisie. Despite the fact that Bierce certainly admired honor in a very peculiar way, we have come to realize that he did not really love war; his general attitude toward war was to the search for truth, even if this was bitter and brutal. All the same, frustration is a constant in many of Bierce’s

short stories; this is usually expressed through the fate of the death of good, honest and brave heroes.

Bierce frequently starts with an unusual situation surrounded by strange circumstances, in order to offer us a disquisition about the abnormal thinking and perceiving faculties of the protagonist, not just his emotions. But He wants us to see what really happens in the act of happening, with a few selected details to provide for a certain *vraisemblance*. In this sense, we can define him as realist in technique, even when he never deemed himself so. On the other hand, he was –as Crane was too, later- introducing the philosophic idea that nothing is actually real, that existence is an illusion – things only appear to be: certainly an impressionistic characteristic. In the end, we could say that “his inspiration was romantic, but his method was almost modern in its realism at times.”¹² Bierce anticipates to the 20th century trends in his curious and somehow relative treatment of time as Faulkner did later, in the personification of objects such as in Crane’s stories, (though first in Poe’s), in his approach to nature as London and Hemingway did, in the utilization of religious symbols as O’Connor did later, and finally, in the crude depiction of the human evolution since infancy and, through war, to painful experience as in Anderson. In common with Crane, one action is usually the basis for the tale, while dialogue is reduced to a minimum.

Through this paper, we have seen that Bierce’s temporal scheme is often altered in an extremely intense situation: time becomes relative and events that seem to take an eternity may, in reality, happen in a matter of minutes, and vice versa. This has proved to be an extremely effective technique for writers, who must keep their focus on the battle circumstances in order to sustain the suspense, and yet move away in time and space from the physical restrictions of the battlefield to vary the effects. Perhaps Bierce’s best contribution to fantastic literature would be his peculiar combination of irony and terror: his skilful technique by which he constructs a peculiar relationship between plot and character, so that we readers feel a deep fear subtly combined with a bitter intuition that our feeling is not quite appropriate.

As we have seen, Bierce’s tales are to be regarded as incredible events occurring in quite credible surroundings, not strictly realistic. As with many of Crane’s short stories, a universe where these atrocities could occur, remained hostile to his characters as did the God who allegedly managed human affairs: rather an impressionistic tendency. Yet Bierce’s peculiar tales are always pervaded by a Poesque “magic of verisimilitude.” Certainly the Gothic terror of Poe, Le Fanu, and Blackwood is, by definition, abnormal from a realistic framework; whereas Bierce’s stories are given the reinforcement of a totally possible contemporary setting. This is the reason why Bierce can interchange subjectivity and objectivity of time in his war fiction without dismantling the illusion of

reality. Bierce's imagery, and of course later Crane's, supports the naturalistic- negative conception of war.¹³

We could summarize Bierce's technique in his war short stories as a delicious recipe of fantastic horror literature with the necessary oil of realistic touches. This is because, "Afin de conserver l'effet fantastique, qui dépend toujours de ce que l'on pourrait qualifier d'une négociation entre l'autorité textuelle et la crédulité du lecteur, le texte doit pouvoir prouver sa prétendue "honnêteté" et donc tend à représenter dans une large mesure la réalité telle que nous la connaissons"(Ferreras 79). Horror writers were visionaries of the oncoming 20th century revolution and worked some of its ideas into their stories. Poe is mainly concerned with human irrationality, the *in vogue* notion that pure cognition is faulty and cannot contain the whole world. Now, Bierce's deals with the conclusive idea of a passively hostile universe, one alien to man. After Bierce, Lovecraft abounds in this same topic, as related to the inconsequentiality of man and his works, surrounded by an enormous but disinterested universe. In the end, Ambrose Bierce will remain one of the most interesting and eccentric figures in American literature, one of the great wits, one of the toughest satirists, and with Crane's permission, naturally, the master of the modern war literature.

End Notes

¹ M. E. Grenander (1982) calls this technique "the tale of ironical terror," when applied to the terror story.

² According to Wheeler (1990), to think of something as uncanny is an intellectual reaction; to think of it as horrible is a visceral one.

³ It seems quite clear that Bierce (and his audience) were familiar with the physiological effects of hanging, if we take a look to his articles in the *Examiner* and in the "Prattle" column.

⁴ When the reader is given Farquhar's details about his Southern military origin, a certain sympathy arouses in him, which helps believe the strange events he is about to read.

⁵ David R. Saliba, A psychology of fear: the nightmare formula in Edgar Allan Poe (Langham, Md.: University Press of America, 1990), 15. ©1980.

⁶ Cathy N. Davidson wrote that "The name *Farquhar* has the etymological meaning of 'gray clad man' or 'dark gray man'"(Cited in Ames 1987, 144), showing the reader Farquhar's devotion to the Southern cause as a volunteer.

⁷ Paul Fatout, Ambrose Bierce: The Devil's Lexicographer (Norman, Okla.: Oklahoma University Press, 1951), 48-49.

⁸ Quoted from Ambrose Bierce, The Collected Stories of Ambrose Bierce (New York and Washington: the Neale Publishing Company, 1909-12), *The Devil's Dictionary*, VII, 17.

⁹ When employing reverse psychology –as Montresor in Poe’s “The Cask of Amontillado”–, we do or ask for the opposite of what we want and because of human nature, we end up with what we really wished.

¹⁰ “Underdetermination” is usually defined as a gap between what we say and what we really mean, i.e. metaphor and metonymy.

¹¹ This is rather a device of confirmation, more than revelation of something long-anticipated. The end of the story does not shock us as a surprise, for the reader has the intuition of what is coming and this only adds to his feeling of terror. Vid. Wheeler 1990: 17.

¹² Carey McWilliams, Ambrose Bierce: A Biography (New York: A. and C. Boni, 1929), 235.

¹³ Vid. Solomon (1982).

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