

WAR AND THE PSYCHE OF MAN IN THE SHORT STORIES OF AMBROSE BIERCE

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Abstract

Man's power of Reason takes leave of him when it is a question of war. According to thinkers of the ancient times, war is inherent both in human nature and social order. Emotional events and national trauma are the resultants of war. Ancient writers had the wont of glorifying war. Nowadays, Civil war writers pray for eternal peace. According to Bierce, man is sentenced to life for "Nature red in tooth the claw". Bierce could view the war taught actualities and ironies as deep psychological experiences, and could recreate the war's moods and events into fictional material. Three stories of Bierce Chickamauga, Jay Martinand Wagginsare dealt with in this paper give an expose to Bierce's thoughts on war.

Keywords and expressions: Persecution, ambushade, overwhelming natural forces, grotesque, harsh reality, clotted blood, anonymity, anesthesia, repulsive, vignettes.

Man, endowed with the faculty of reasoning, refuses to use it when it is a question of war. He knows that war is a veritable hell. Yet he miserably fails to understand the futility and colossal waste accompanying this violent form of human conflict. Through war he actually makes a naked display of his brute power and heartlessness. And this monstrous evil acts against all human values. War always leaves a bad taste in the victorious and the vanquished alike because the precious human loss on both sides can never be compensated for by any means. Young Bierce, a dare-devil participant in the Civil War, who found the battle-field exhilarating in the beginning, "felt the shock to his romantic sensibilities, when he saw the gorgeous Virginia landscape polluted by decaying corpses" (Solomon, **The Faded Banners**, *Introduction X*). In his mature years, he was convinced of the larger truth that war was a cosmic horror; like the Great War poet Wilfred Owen, he felt that truth must not be left untold. The compulsion of this dormant feeling resulted in the creation of stories that "catch the excitement and emotional impact of the intense struggle" (Solomon, **The Faded Banners**, *Introduction VII*).

According to thinkers of the ancient times, war is inherent both in human nature and in social order; and they thought it to be inevitable. But modern thinkers, psychologists, sociologists, and men of letters, hold the view that war is not inevitable, nor it is a necessary evil. As war is caused mainly by social tensions and man's instinct of aggression, these could possibly be kept under control by proper education.

Truly, the four years of American Civil War, described as an irrepressible conflict, were a great emotional event and a national trauma. It brought about a revolutionary change in the contemporary writers attitude to war. This internal war caused more human agony than any other external aggression in earlier world history. It was the first modern war in the sense that mines, rifles, powerful cannons, trenches, rail-roads, and telecommunication systems were used for the first time. Almost one million people were killed or wounded. Diseases, natural corollaries of war also took a heavy toll. Civilian hardships were great; crimes, atrocities, and military persecutions became everyday occurrences, making life terrible for the innocent civilians. It divided the nation, even families. It left a heritage of grief and bitterness that could be seen in part even today.

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On the positive side, it moved the sensitive literary artists of this period to paint the seamy side of war, unlike the writers of the earlier eras who glorified it. In a veiled way, the Civil War writers made a plea for eternal peace, in order to stop the extinction of human race. In this nuclear age, their prophetic plea has assumed a greater relevance and singular significance. It could be interesting here to quote Vincent Starrett, who, making a comparison of the war stories of Bierce and Stephen Crane, remarks, “the horrors of both men sometimes transcend artistic effect; but their works are enduring peace tracts” (37-38).

The Civil War brought about family disorganization. It created tension in family. It created conflict between parents and children. It cut short the lives of many ambitious and blossoming young men. All these conflicts and the consequent fear, dilemma, feeling of insecurity, and violent death Bierce faithfully highlights through his imaginative, realistic, and psychologically convincing *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians*: “It is the aura, the feeling and the essence of the war that Bierce portrays” (Solomon, **The Faded Banners**, *Introduction VIII*). Above all, Bierce expresses man’s insignificance before the overwhelming natural forces. “Man, in Bierce’s reckoning, is ‘sentenced to life’ for ‘Nature red in tooth the claw’ has made an ambushade for him’ (*Berkove 28*).

Besides, Bierce with his romantic temperament, wanted to write on themes that were out of the ordinary, uncommon, unusual, and far removed from the “even tenor of normal life” (Boynton 674). Naturally, the slices of battle life with which he was so intimately connected, afforded him an opportunity to express a sense of impatience with human kind in general. The weight of war which was lying heavily upon his spirit, throughout his life, found a proper outlet through his stories. All the biographers point to his obsession with the unfailing memory of the horrors of war and the hapless death of its unfortunate victims.

To Bierce, the Civil War was a great emotional adventure that took him from his early insipid life on an Indiana farm deep into the darkest recesses of experience (McWilliams 64). Eric Solomon remarks that “combat naturally supplied the ultimate pressure, the extreme stress, the essential test for man” (**The Faded Banners**, *Introduction VIII*). Perhaps, Bierce was the first writer to portray the tense emotional states experienced by soldiers with rich first-hand knowledge. Fascinated by the glory of a soldier’s life, he fought bravely against the Confederacy at various engagements. Once he was captured as a prisoner of war but he escaped unhurt. But later, he was severely wounded in the head while participating in one of the bloodiest battles fought at Kenesaw Mountain, and emerged from death to ponder over war. As a man of deep feelings and a philosophical outlook in his advancing years, he could view war as a most resentful and repulsive horror and a absurd nightmare. To quote Carey McWilliams: “The war was a troubling memory. It never left him; he mused and puzzled about it all his life. He was still thinking about it when, an old man over seventy, he made that last inspection of the old battlefields” (63). Bierce’s daughter, Helen Bierce, concurs with the views of McWilliams and adds that, “Soldiering in the Civil War, he had seen many shattered bodies, and could never rid himself of the horror of them” (458).

The war is destructive of precious youth and vitality and this is illustrated in many of Bierce’s stories concerned with the combatants. In actual life, because of the folly and ego of a few powers – hungry men, thousands of soldiers became innocent victims to the vicious bolt of war. Many young men fell prey to the all-engulfing death. The following few lines of Bierce’s poem supply a striking example of his obsession with death caused on account of unremitting war;

The river of the valley
Crept sighing to the sea;

And crimson with the red, red blood
 That ran for victory.
 And through a rain of light
 They quiver'd, shiver'd, in amaze
 And watch'd the dead all night: (qtd. In MCWilliams, 63).

Bierce could thus view the war-taught actualities and ironies and deep psychological experiences, and could recreate the war's moods and events into fictional material. His achievement lies in his keen and unclouded perception of the horrid nature of modern war from an altogether different angle even before the two World Wars. He could glean through his insight what psychologists were to arrive at by analytical methods nearly after fifty years. A non-participant civilian usually thinks of only the glories of war and the heroic deeds of brave men, whereas a combatant-participant realizes through his first-hand experience the other side-of ugliness and brutality. That is why, the episodes created by Bierce for his war stories never present war as something glamorous, romantic, or picturesque.

A story of enduring interest, *Chickamauga*, perhaps, has no parallel in the annals of short fiction. A unique tale hauntingly told, it focuses principally on the plain horrors of war and remains to date the most powerful indictment of war. The mass killing of soldiers at the battle of Chickamauga is a part of history. As one belonging to the defeated forces, Bierce had witnessed the cruel and appalling deaths of his companions as well as their opponents. He was thoroughly convinced that the mass butchery was due to the thoughtless strategies adopted by the Commanding Officers who, in turn, were helpless prey in the web of circumstances much beyond their power. Probably, this avoidable slaughter disturbed him and made him ponder over the fate of innocent victims for a number of years. The result of this lasting impression and reflection was *Chickamauga*, a portrayal of the indignity, ruthlessness, and absurdity of war. Appropriately, the story takes its title from "a grossly mismanaged engagement (at Chickamauga) in which the casualties on both sides, during the first four hours of battle, ran close to 50 per cent" (Davidson 141). The richness of this tale's content with its accent on psychological symbolism and the concentrated style would offer fresh insights into every reading.

The entire first section of the story is devoted to a discussion of the happy blending of the hereditary characteristics and the environmental influences that determine the behavior of the protagonist—a deaf-mute boy aged about six years. Though he is physically defective and his two senses sub normally dull, under the unequivocal impact of heredity and environment, he behaves like any other normal child. Bierce dwells at length on this aspect with the perceptive touch of a social psychologist.

We are told that the child "born to war" is a descendent of the heroic race and like his forebear "who were trained to memorable feats of discovery and conquest, "he was inherited the warrior-fire "which once kindled is never extinguished." The boy born just at the beginning of the turbulent times of the Civil War has been brought up in the martial environment. It may be noted that the boy's age is six and the Civil War too lasted six years. The boy's father, a poor planter, was a soldier once, and he used to read military books even during times of peace. The paintings and the engravings displayed at his "rude" home depicted scenes from battles.

The child's innate lust for war obviously expresses itself in the making of a wooden sword without his parents' knowledge or aid. Holding the toy-sword in his hand, he happily strays into the nearby jungle on that fateful day. He finds it a thrilling experience to imitate the "game"

indulged in by the elders-the game of a soldier. Enacting different postures of aggression and defence, he proceeds into the thick of the forest fighting the imaginary foe with utter abandon and pursues the game to a dangerous extreme. Woodruff comments that “the most noticeable aspect of the child’s military pantomime is its complete naturalness-his instinctive delight in the idea of power and aggression” (39).

The child’s confrontation with the unknown rabbit and his reactions reveal the author’s thorough knowledge of child psychology. Turning towards a place where some boulders are kept on the banks of the brook, the boy confronts a rabbit--the most harmless of animals. This unknown creature with its ears erect and paw suspended appears to heart beats hard with terror. Blind with tears, he sobs for the protective arms of his mother. The arm in his hand is not any longer a weapon; it becomes a companion to the lonely child threatened by an unknown enemy. This reveals the feeling the child falls asleep holding the companion tight. The situation is not merely ironical, it is grotesque. The victor of a well-armed army is being terrified by a harmless, unarmed innocent creature. And both these--valour and fear-are inherent in human nature. And both these--the valour and fear-are inherent in human nature. The author also drives home the psychological truth that the child is not afraid of the known--the imaginary army or the really mauled soldiers--whereas he is terrified by the unknown--the rabbit. Since the unknown is shrouded in mystery, even the greatest conqueror of the known cannot conquer the fear of the unknown.

The child’s military game is “in ironic harmony with the romantic conception of war, in contrast, Bierce shows the harsh reality” (*Waggins* 26). The boy wakes up with re-charged energy, without being aware of the terrible battle that raged in the vicinity during the short time of his slumber. “All unheard by him were the roar of the musketry and the shock of the cannon” (*Chickamauga* 22). He comes upon the wounded and maimed combatants crawling like babes towards the stream to quench their thirst. His encounter with these mutilated men narrated at length is really the depiction of war in depth:

They were men. They crept upon their hands and knees. They used their hands only, their arms hanging idle at their sides. They strove to raise their feet, but fell prone in the attempt. They did nothing naturally... They came by dozens and by hundreds... The very ground seemed in motion toward the creek. Occasionally one who had paused did not again go on, but lay motionless. He was dead. (*Chickamauga* 20)

This description provides an authentic insight into the gory and grisly side of war. Bierce conveys his disgust with the whole process of war. But to the innocent and inexperienced boy, the massacre appears to be a “merry spectacle”. A soldier’s face daubed with blood reminds him of the painted clown he has seen in the circus. Bierce uses here the main law of psychology--association of ideas--to demonstrate the child’s innocence. “Associating what he sees with what he knows, the child laughs in glee at the sight of the carnage he surveys” (Davidson *The Experimental Fictions* 39-40). The boy has seen the slave Negroes creep upon their hands and knees to amuse him. Thinking that he could play the game of horse-riding which he used to play at home with the Negro servants, he happily mounts on a crawling man. He is dismounted with a violent jerk by the wounded man. The writhing fragment of humanity then turns upon him.

A face that 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. The unnatural prominence of nose, the absence of chin, the fierce eyes, gave this man the appearance of a great bird of prey crimsoned in throat and breast by the blood of its quarry. The man rose to his knees, the child to his feet. (*Chickamauga* 21).

The other bleeding men crawl like animals and creep like babes. It is the prize offered by war. When the child looks at the silent, grotesque movement of these men for the first time from a distance, he mistakes them for some strange animals. They move forward like “a swarm of great black beetles, with never a sound of going-in silence profound, absolute” (Chickamauga 21). The observer of these ugly scenes is a nameless boy. The observed are repeatedly described as “they” to indicate the anonymity which is an inevitable product of a war-machine. These nameless multitudes die like animals in the jungle, with none to care for them. When surveyed through the eyes of the deaf and dumb protagonist, it appears like a dumb show. The tragedy of a vast humanity of maimed men in its silent intensity is unbearable. The silent tears of the wounded are highly intense and pathetic: “Some, pausing, made strange gestures with their hands, erected their arms, and lowered them again, clasped their heads; spread their palms upward, as men are sometimes seen to do in public prayer” (Chickamauga 20).

Enchanted by the red glow of light seen on the farther side of the creek, the child takes delight in guiding the faithful troops to the blazing ruin of a dwelling. “In the entire wide glare not a living thin was visible. He cared nothing for that; the spectacle pleased and he danced with glee in imitation of the wavering flames” (Chickamauga 23). When his eyes fall on a dead body of a woman, he stands stupefied by the revelation. It is the mangled body of his beloved mother lying in horrifying shape:

There, conspicuous in the light of the conflagration, lay the dead body of a woman-the white face turned upward, the hands thrown out and clutched full of grass, the hands thrown out and clutched full of grass, the clothing deranged the long dark hair in tangles and full of clotted blood. The greater part of the forehead was torn away, and from the jagged hole the brain protruded, overflowing the temple, a frothy mass of grey, crowned with clusters of crimson bubbles-the work of a shell. (Chickamauga 23).

The inexperienced child playing among the horrors of war is awakened to the reality. Perceiving the real horror for the first time, the orphaned deaf-mute child, standing alone in the midst of desolation, makes wild and uncertain gestures to express its inexpressible agony. “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” (Chickamauga 23). Bierce “silences words, as if language itself, released from the mind could be emitted only as a scream” (Jay Martin 119). The anesthesia of war propaganda has left the child. This is what he is capable of.

By presenting this gruesome picture, Bierce, with his rich first-hand experience, suggests that there is nothing glorious in war. While giving the ghastly details of the headless bodies of the soldiers, he sarcastically comments that these men have sacrificed their lives “to make the glory.” War is not an experience of pomp and grandeur but of ugliness and death: “War is not what it seems to be in books and pictures. Only experience, personal experience, can wipe out the false impression and teach the essentials of war. Like all those caught up in war, the child learns the tremendous disparity between the vision and the actuality” (Solomon, *The Bitterness of Battle* 165). The actualities of war are beyond endurance, rather really revolting. The saying “humanity cannot bear too much reality” was true in the case of Bierce. His powerful vignettes of war were rejected by the editors of magazines and publishing houses on the ground that they contained details of repulsive nature. If they are repulsive, then war is repulsive too. They are indeed vivid visualizations of the savagery of war. Bierce, endowed with an idiotic memory,

recalls the real battle scenes in their minutest details and scores victory as an artist with an authentic voice.

Bierce's artistic achievement could be seen in the compressed details of the story. In spite of their brevity, they are multi-valued and serve a variety of purposes. Most often they add to symbolic dimension and thereby increase the explosive force of the story. The symbolic representation of the tender and sensitive mother-child bond yields rich psychological interpretations. In the first part of the story, the author underscores the all-pervading significance of the incomparable mother-love in one powerful sentence - "A mother's heart was breaking for her missing child" (Chickamauga 19). It is the only direct reference to the mother alive; yet it lingers in the mind of the perceptive reader till the conclusion of the story. At the end, when the innocent protagonist glances at the shell-torn body of his affectionate mother, the edifice of his beautiful universe crumbles. The nameless mother of the nameless little boy is a universal symbol-a symbol of hope, compassion, and protection. The mutilated body of the mother immaculate only indicates the shattered hope and the severed attachment of the highest order. It is a symbolic representation of the shrieking insanity of war. This may also represent a Freudian symbol-the mother standing for the will-to-live and the war-mongers for the death-wish.

War has made many a child orphan. The act of heinous war-mongers has made a deaf-mute child an orphan-an act which is all the more tragic. The innate need for a mother's tender love and protection is the sole life-sustaining factor in the case of a dumb child, and that binding force is completely cut off. When the story ends, we find the child at the end of his "military career," standing as a lonely pathetic figure symbolizing the despair and desolation wrought by war. "He flung in his sword-surrender to the superior forces of nature" (Chickamauga 19). The experiences of the child symbolize the eternal verities of the human condition. The author views the havoc philosophically as he is convinced that man is hedged in by the vast mighty forces of nature. War destroys the conquered and the conqueror alike.

The deaf-mute by himself is a powerful symbol. He is repeatedly mentioned as a leader and even as a victorious leader. The child-leader has a literal meaning in the story but suggests other meanings as well. The leader is a symbol representing the power-hungry, aggressive, inhuman, and egoistic military leader who refuses to understand the futility of war. It is a symbol of one who inflicts untold miseries and sufferings on thousands of soldiers and civilians just to grab power and thus to satisfy his ego. He will understand the real nature of the tragedy only when it becomes personal.

Like *Chickamauga*, *The Coup de Grace* also testifies to the author's sensitive grasp of human suffering as its worst. Bierce once again illustrates the truth that people will not realize the horrendous nature of war unless someone dear to them is seriously affected. Wisdom dawns on the protagonist, Captain Madwell, only when he sees the appalling condition of the mortally wounded Sergeant Halcrow, who happens to be his bosom friend. Till then the grisly side of war has not left any impact upon his individual consciousness. It could be well exemplified from the Captain's behavior just a few moments before he comes across the ghastly sight of his devoted companion.

The dead on his right hand on his left were unrewarded as he passed. As occasional low moan from some sorely-stricken wretch whom the relief-parties had not reached, and who would have to pass a comfortless night beneath the stars with his thirst to keep him company, was equally unheeded. (*The Coup de Grace* 55).

This attitude of Madwell is just like that of any other soldier belonging to a group. Group or mob behavior is always characterized by a diminished sense of responsibility and a lack of concern for fellow beings. It is manifested in Madwell's indifference to the suffering soldiers. In a battle-field, it is a thing which hardly deserves to be noticed. In fact, he is benumbed by the horrors of war like others in the group.

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