



HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

Hugvísindasvið

Fortitude in the Face of Adversity

Irony in Ambrose Bierce's short story "A Horseman in the Sky"

Ritgerð til B.A.-prófs

Gyða Hafðís Margeirsdóttir

Maí 2012

University of Iceland
School of Humanities
Department of English

Fortitude in the Face of Adversity

Irony in Ambrose Bierce's short story "A Horseman in the Sky"

B.A. Essay

Gyða Hafðís Margeirsdóttir

Kt.: 041156-3339

Supervisor: Anna Heiða Pálsdóttir

May 2012

Abstract

This B.A. thesis examines Ambrose Bierce's use of irony in portraying the struggle between patriotism and familial duty in his short story "The Horseman in the Sky" published in *The Examiner* in 1889. Bierce made some minor changes to the story and when it was republished in 1892 he had also changed the name to "A Horseman in the Sky." The changes he made alter the readers understanding of the protagonist's character and this thesis will discuss how a minor difference in portraying a character can lead to a completely different reading. In the case of Carter Druse, the protagonist in the story, this minor change concerns what drives him to perform the act of parenticide. The difference between these two versions is examined in relation to Bierce's own experience in the Civil War, which definitely inspired his writing. In the original version, Druse is driven insane, but in the revised version he keeps his sanity. The story revolves around three main events: Druse's enlistment in the Union army, his parting from his father and mother, and finally, his decision to shoot his father. Bierce's use of irony is also discussed, and how he employs it to add to the effect he aims to draw forth. His intention to show the utter futility of the Civil War is analyzed in relation to his known sarcasm and dark mood which earned him the name "Bitter Bierce." To show how deceptive his style can be, examples from three critics, who are in disagreement on how to interpret Carter Druse's character, is brought forward, and narratology is used as a theory to examine Bierce's unique narrative approach. Examples from other war stories he wrote are also used to show his determination to expose the senselessness of the American Civil War.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction.....	1
2. Patriotism v/s Family	3
3. Carter Druse's Parting from his Father	7
4. Duty v/s Courage in the Face of Fortitude	16
5. Conclusion	20
Works Cited	21

1. Introduction

The short story “The Horseman in the Sky” is one of Ambrose Bierce’s war stories, written about the American Civil War. The story was first published in the *Examiner* on April 14 1889 with the title “The Horseman in the Sky” and in 1892 a revised version, which he named, “A Horseman in the Sky” appeared in his collection of short stories which he called *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians*. The central theme of the story is the fratricidal struggle of the Civil War. When the story was first published, the events of that ghastly war, which started in 1861 and lasted for four years, were still fresh in people’s memory.

Ambrose Gwinett Bierce was born on 24 June 1842, at Horse Creek Cave in Meigs County, Ohio. He was a prolific short story writer, but never wrote a novel. In his opinion a novel was nothing but “a short story padded” (Davies X). As a soldier in the American Civil War, Bierce witnessed horror and death and this psychological experience, in addition to his physical injury caused by a terrible head wound, stayed with him throughout his life. The influence that this experience had on his character is inevitably a large factor in this story as well as in all of Bierce’s writings. This thesis examines Bierce’s portrayal of the Civil War’s horror and brutality, concentrating on his use of irony to capture the depth of courage needed in situations that soldiers are confronted with in a war that forced brothers to fight brothers, and in Carter Druse’s case, a son has to make an impossible choice between military and familial duty.

The study of Ambrose Bierce’s “A Horseman in the Sky” is divided into three main chapters and narratology will be used as a theory to examine Bierce’s unique narrative approach. These three chapters evolve around the three main events concerning the core values of the story. Bierce revised the 1892 version slightly from his original text, and examples will be taken on how these minor changes alter the final effect. Moreover, his exceptional transformation of the traditional conventions of narration and his use of irony to exploit the senselessness of civil wars will be studied in the first chapter the conflict between patriotism versus family is studied in relation with the ethics of Druse’s decision to leave his dying mother. In the second chapter, Carter Druse’s parting from his father will be studied, examining the difference between the first version from 1889 named “The Horseman in the Sky” and the second version “A Horseman in the Sky” published in 1892. Bierce’s own participation in the Civil

War will be observed in relation to his portrayal of a young soldier who leaves his home to go soldiering. The third and last chapter aims to show the irony that is the centre of Bierce's portrayal of a soldier's duty. Also, with special emphasis on the short story form which was Bierce's specialty, examples from other short stories, written by him, will be used to show how through his concise narration, the sheer futility of the war is exposed, followed by an ending that has a shocking effect on the reader.

2. Patriotism v/s Family

The protagonist in “A Horseman in the Sky” is a young soldier named Carter Druse, a character who is fighting his inner feelings, being both a soldier and a son, and in this respect, his situation is similar to how the whole American country is literally torn in two by this savage war which divided the country into two sides, the North and the South, fighting around regional identities. This resulted for instance in the state of Virginia being divided into two, West Virginia and Virginia. It also meant that families were divided into fighting opponents and the war affected all family members in one way or another. In Carter Druse’s instance he becomes his father’s enemy in war when he enlists, and when he is faced with a moral choice, the ethics of his decisions, first to leave his dying mother and secondly his last action towards his father, is at the core of the ongoing conflict between patriotism and family.

When Druse is first introduced, he is a nameless sentinel who has fallen asleep at his post by the side of a road in the western part of Virginia. This first encounter indicates that the sentinel is not much of a soldier, and does not handle the responsibility given to him by his superiors particularly well. In fact, it is established a few lines later that “the criminal” would have seen the pending danger had he been awake. The passiveness in the way in which his position is described as if he is almost dead, except the cartridge-box at the back of his belt that moves slightly from his breathing, is in clear contrast with the savage landscape of the scene. This implies an inactive participation of the sentinel while at the same time it involves the landscape directly in the upcoming events. Hence, his position at the top of that thousand foot high cliff emphasizes that his life is on the edge, and he could be sentenced to death if discovered sleeping, that being the penalty for this crime.

This first encounter with Carter Druse is in the autumn of the year 1861, and only a few months after the war has begun. Despite this fact, the soldier has “by conscience and courage, by deeds of devotion and daring” (Bierce, “A Horseman” 3) earned respectability and therefore he has been given this important assignment. Here is a perfect example of Bierce’s irony, creating discrepancy by first telling the reader of his careless behaviour and then of his alleged fame, which ultimately brings about his downfall. Moreover, the fact that the war has only been going on for a few months shows that Bierce is playing on the irony of his speedy glory, or as noted by Donald T.

Blume, in *Ambrose Bierce's Civilians and Soldiers in Context: a Critical Study*, Bierce's portrayal of Druse as an outstanding soldier "is almost certainly a deliberate, ironic deception, and at the least an exaggeration designed to mislead unwary readers" (151).

Bierce uses flashback to explain Carter Druse's position, and how it came about that he has both abandoned his dying mother, and forsaken his father's wishes by enlisting in the Union army. This young Virginian, positioned sleeping on the top of a cliff, is an only child, raised in wealth and good care. When Druse informs his father that he is going to join a Union regiment, his father does not want his mother to know. By enlisting in the Union army, and not the Confederate army, Carter becomes a traitor to Virginia, and more importantly, it makes him a traitor to his family. His action especially affects his mother, who is sick, and the knowledge of her son's betrayal would, according to what his father says, kill her (Bierce, "A Horseman" 2). At this point in the story Carter is a civilian, and his real responsibility as an only child lies with his family. By exploiting this character flaw in Druse, Bierce is laying the ground for his later action, in other words, this action of irresponsibility is parallel to his lack of duty when he falls asleep at his post. This also foreshadows the final act, when he again puts his military ambitions before his civilian considerations.

Even though Bierce does not reveal much about Carter Druse as a civilian, there are sufficient facts in the text to show the reader that he is an ambitious young man, but still not mature enough to act responsibly towards his familial duty. This becomes particularly evident in his way of informing his father of his decision, instead of asking him if he may go. He is determined to pursue honour and respect in the military and there is nothing that can change his mind, not even the fact that his mother is dying. The way in which his father tells him about his mother's condition makes this point transparent, because, his father does not leave out the fact that Druse has been told especially about her illness by the physician, "[y]our mother, as the physician has informed you, is in a most critical condition; at the best she cannot be with us longer than a few weeks, but that time is precious" (2). In this way, Bierce is planting a seed in the reader's mind, namely, foreshadowing Druse's act at the end of the story, when he decides to shoot at the horseman. He has a choice at this point, to stay with his dying mother, but instead he rushes on to war, in this case as well, not putting familial duty before his own ambition.

This conversation between Druse and his father is apparently a reflection of Bierce's own alienation from his parents, and particularly from his mother. Bierce's portrayal of the relationship between children and their parents is tainted by his own experience and surfaces in many of the stories he wrote. In her essay "Childhood and the Fear of Death in Ambrose Bierce's *The Parenticide Club* and 'Visions of the Night'," Sharon Talley takes an example from the story "Three and One are One" where Bierce calls the home "a veritable citadel of duty" (*Terror by Night* 163) to show how Bierce's attitude towards "home" and "duty" influences his portrayal of family. In other words, the home is a fortress, lacking love and warmth, and the "caustic family portraits in his fiction, intimates unresolved psychic conflict that he masked with defensive acerbity" (Talley 60), which played a part in earning him the name "Bitter Bierce."

The struggle between loyalty to the Union and family is the main theme of many of Bierce's stories, and as mentioned above, his attitude toward family is stated in the short story "Three and One are One" where his viewpoint toward duty is stated in the words "duty is as cruel as death!" (*Terror by Night* 153), similarly, the struggle between duty and familial responsibility is the main theme of the story "A Horseman in the Sky." It is clear that the reader feels no sympathy for Druse when he makes his decision to leave, instead of staying. Being an only child adds to the effect that he is deserting his mother at a crucial time. Nevertheless, Bierce gives some of the responsibility for Druse's departure to the father with his expressing that Druse should do what he believes to be his duty. This struggle between duty and responsibilities to family is obviously not only the son's concern, it also affects the father. Given that Bierce uses irony to express in what kind of impossible situations this war puts families, this is a perfect example. Both the son and the father are convinced that they are doing their duty, even though in the end their duties can be interpreted in the exact opposite way.

There is no question of Druse's need to show his father how determined he is to become a soldier, and consequently, his father's unspoken request that he stays with his mother is far less important to him. Thus, because of his determination, it is evident that had his father not permitted him to go, Druse would have been unable to accept the repulse as defeat. In portraying Druse's character in this way, Bierce is drawing the reader's attention to his selfishness, and more importantly, to his set of values. Druse is truly convinced that his presence is more important to the Union army than to his home, and that fact is known to his father. In his formerly mentioned study, Blume points out

that “Bierce’s careful construction of the father’s particular choice of phrasing” (149) indicates his knowledge of Druse’s plan to enlist, and even though Druse’s father has tried to appeal to him through his concern for his mother, the attempt fails (149), therefore there is no hope that further attempts on behalf of the father will delay Druse’s enlistment (149). Determination and selfishness is the most important character trait in Bierce’s portrayal of Carter Druse, and the relationship with his parents does not escape his egotism.

An important part of Bierce’s plot is the fact that Druse is an only child, with all its pros and cons that as a result influences the relationship with his parents. In her book *The Writer’s Guide to Character Traits*, Linda N. Edelstein lists the traits of the only child as an adult, and among them is, for example, “high self-esteem . . . high achiever; expects a lot from life,” and “not used to competition, fears, or failure” (189). These are all character traits that can be identified in Carter Druse, and serve to enlighten the reader of the reasons why he acts the way he does, and therefore, his ethics are based on his social and familial status in life. First, his high self-esteem plays an important part in his decision to enlist, he finds himself more important to society than to his family, secondly, his high expectations of life affect his decision to enlist in the Union army, giving him the advantage of knowing the battle ground thoroughly, instead of fighting on the defensive side of the Federal army, and thirdly, his being unused to competition, fears and failure, explains how he sees his own military career as a success.

To fully understand Carter Druse and his decision to enlist in the Union regiment in Grafton, Virginia, the reader must keep in mind the social situation, both at the time when the story was written, and at the time the story unfolds. As Blume points out, Bierce knows his readers, and by letting his protagonist enlists in the Union army, he is well aware of the fact that they will “immediately upon learning of this decision credit Druse for taking the high moral ground” (148). His struggle is between family and patriotism and consequently his decision is marked by the excitement that the war causes in patriotic hearts, or as Blume puts it, “[b]oth Bierce and Druse, along with tens of thousands of other young men on both sides of the struggle, enlisted in the heady patriotic days immediately following the outbreak of the war and presumably both were convinced enlisting was the proper thing to do” (147). To sum up, taking in consideration the social circumstances, the ethics of Druse’s decision to leave his dying mother is understandable.

3. Carter Druse's Parting from his Father

Bierce divides the story of Carter Druse into four chapters, and the events are not presented to the reader in chronological order: in the first chapter the sentinel is nameless, but the landscape is not, it is in the western part of Virginia. In chapter two, Bierce uses a flashback to introduce the sentinel as Carter Druse, a young Virginian. This vague information about the protagonist is, if closely viewed, a major factor in the plot, because of the fact that the scene is set in West Virginia which did not become a part of the Union until the year 1863. This indicates that Druse, a Southerner by birth but a Northern soldier, is not on friendly grounds, in spite of the fact that "his home was but a few miles from where he now lay" (Bierce, "A Horseman" 2). Also, the reader learns about his familial status and the reason for his position "in the clump of laurel" (2) being at cause of his own military ambition. Even though this part is only covered by a few lines in the story, Bierce's portrayal of these events is crucially different in the original and revised versions, which ultimately leaves the reader of each version with a completely different understanding of Druse's action.

This important difference between the two versions is only caused by a slight change in how the scene is portrayed, yet, it alters the final effect in a significant way. In his original version from 1889 "The Horseman in the Sky", Bierce portrays this moment in favour of the father, making him softer and more sympathetic than in the later revised version "A Horseman in the Sky". This is done by only leaving out one word "hope" in the revised version. Even though it is only a minor change, it affects the outcome and shows even better Bierce's intention to exploit with irony the futility of the war. In both versions, Carter Druse simply informs his father of his decision, in a quiet and grave manner (Bierce, "A Horseman" 2). The following response from his father is what Bierce revised, making the father less emotional than in the original text. The original text from 1889 states "[g]o Carter, and whatever may happen, I hope that you will do what you conceive to be your duty" (Blume 148). In the revised version where he says "[w]ell go, sir, and whatever may occur do what you conceive to be your duty" (2), does not show Druse's father in the same sympathetic light: he is ordering his son to do his duty instead of hoping that he will perform what he considers to be his duty.

In the original version from 1889, Bierce's sympathy for the father is expressed with the word "hope", while in the revised text, the irony lies in the father's wish that

his son will perform his duty, no matter what. Consequently, in the last scene of the revised text, when Druse is faced with his impossible choice, he reflects back to this last advice given to him by his father. Bierce's compassion for Carter Druse's character has been debated on and in his book *A Prescription for Adversity: The Moral Art of Ambrose Bierce*, Lawrence I. Berkove states that Bierce leads the reader through Druse's situation with only one purpose in mind: to portray his sympathetic character (105-6). Blume does not agree with Berkove, and he finds Berkove's reading to be "illustrative of just how deceptive Bierce's narrative can be" (147), hence, Blume is saying that Berkove misunderstands Bierce's characterization of Druse, which means that Bierce succeeds in making Druse's character "decidedly ambivalent" (147). These two different understandings of Druse's character symbolize in fact the difference in Druse's character that is portrayed in the two different versions of the story.

There is a clear and certain difference in these two versions concerning Bierce's empathy towards his characters, even though it is only brought about with one little word "hope" as mentioned above. This small change from hoping that Carter will do his duty to ordering him to do it, triggers less sympathy with the reader, and as Blume points out, the revised father figure who is harsh and cold hearted, is a character that "will be a great deal easier to kill when the time comes" (155), while in the original version, "his actions and words are those of a loving husband and loving father about to lose his wife to death and his son to war" (149) and his only concern is that his son will perform his duty. This indicates that Bierce's compassion for Carter Druse has grown in the three years that pass between the publishing of these two versions, while his compassion for the father lessens in the revised version. Blume and Berkove do not agree on this and there is even a third side to this element in the story.

In his analysis, Blume points out that it is important to understand Druse's actions as a civilian to completely understand Bierce's intention when he created this "decidedly ambivalent" character (147). Berkove, however, points out that Druse's "personal and private civil war between mind and heart, between reason and compassion, is no less devastating for its silence and restrained display" (111). He goes on to say that, inevitably, Druse will reach a point where reason and compassion split, which leads to what he expresses in the words "the soldier and civilian must go separate ways" (112), and he adds, that "one or the other – mind or heart – must die within the man" (112), in other words, Druse is destined to go mad. This is in contrast to what Blume says in his analysis, pointing out that Bierce is determined to defend men that are

only doing their proper military duties, therefore “it would not be consistent to have Carter Druse driven permanently mad by his faithful adherence to the dictates of military duty” (154). There is still one more option in portraying Carter Druse’s character, and that is to see him as he is, a young man from Virginia, caught up in the glorified image of a brutal war, exactly like Ambrose Bierce once was, who in the act of duty faces the question if there truly is an enemy who is wholly in the right, causing the soldier to feel as every enemy could just as well be his father or his brother.

To understand Bierce’s hidden agenda, simply to introduce the reader to an ordinary young man in a dire situation, it is best to explore the way in which Carter Druse’s character is portrayed in Bierce’s original version and then compare the revised version with its small but significant changes. In the original story it is obvious that Druse does not handle the responsibility that has been handed to him and he ends up going mad. These last few lines in the story are ultimately what the plot revolves around and by portraying Druse’s madness in the end, Bierce does not succeed in delivering to the reader the importance of courage, which he knew from his own experience was a soldier’s most important quality. In the original story Carter’s madness is evident when he explains to the Federal sergeant that he shot a horse with wings, but in the revised version this simply becomes the plain action of shooting a horse. As a result, this essential difference in Bierce’s portrayal of the soldier who is given an impossible task, changes the reader’s conception of Druse from being a civilian who goes mad, to a soldier that performs what he conceives to be his expected military duty.

Even though it is indicated that Druse’s father respects his decision, he is clearly insinuating that his son is a traitor to him as well as to Virginia, and more importantly to his dying mother. Moreover, the father is hopeful that he will get a later chance to “speak further of the matter” (Bierce, “A Horseman” 2), which could mean that he sees himself as the victor, and therefore he could inform the boy of the immorality of his decision. There are several ways in which the word “matter” can be analyzed. One way to interpret it is that his father is referring to him abandoning his mother on her deathbed, and by doing so his priorities are not acceptable to his father, hence, as Blume puts it in his analysis, the father “is suffering intensely at the sight of his son abandoning his dying mother” (150). The “matter” may also refer to his enlistment in the Union army, which makes him a traitor to Virginia, and consequently, his father’s rival in the Civil War. In any case, Bierce is careful when it comes to the father’s emotions, except when it comes to revealing “the essentially selfish nature of Carter

Druse's decision to enlist" (Blume 150), which materializes in the fact that, even though the physician has informed Druse of his mother's condition, he is still set on pursuing a military career, and that is first and foremost the cause of his father's breaking heart.

As stated above, the state of Virginia is divided into two, and so is Druse's family, causing a father and his son to support separate sides. Even so, Carter Druse respects his father and his "bowing reverently" (Bierce, "A Horseman" 2) to his father, indicates so, but, his father returns the curtsy in a stately manner to hide his real feelings, his breaking heart (2). When Carter leaves his comfortable home "to go soldiering" (3), nothing suggests that he is struggling with his decision in any way. Given the irony in these courteous and polite goodbyes, their last encounter becomes even more tragic than if their separation had been unfriendly. By establishing their affection for each other, Bierce aims to amplify the impact that the ending will have on the reader. This he does in the spirit of what Aristotle lectured so long ago in his book *Aristotle: The Poetics*, giving importance to the fact that the characters have some kind of relationship before the tragic event occurs (Gilbert 88). Without this relationship, the only purpose with the event will be to describe plain suffering, which would definitely not have the same effect on the reader (Gilbert 88). In other words, by not creating a relationship between the characters, the suffering is less effective, "but when the sufferings are those of persons who feel affection for each other, as when brother kills a brother, or a son his father, or a mother her son, or a son his mother, or is about to do so, or anyone does something of the kind, these are the deeds to look for" (Gilbert 88). This use of dramatic irony adds to the shocking effect of the last sentences of the story, Carter's revelation.

This revelation is brought about through a careful description of events which ultimately lead to Carter Druse facing these hostile surroundings alone. In the valley below the cliff where he is positioned there are five regiments of Federal infantry (Bierce, "A Horseman" 2) all of which are depending on this "unfaithful sentinel" (2). His military duty is to eliminate all danger that threatens the safety of his fellow soldiers, therefore, when he is faced with an enemy who could endanger them, this duty becomes quite obvious; he must shoot the enemy. But he hesitates, misleading the reader into thinking that Carter is only pausing because he finds it difficult to shoot an enemy, no necessarily this particular enemy, but any enemy at all. The real reason for his hesitation only becomes evident to the reader in the last paragraph of the story. In a third person narrative, the reader learns about Druse's first impression of the sight of a

horseman, standing “motionless at the extreme edge of the capping rock and sharply outlined against the sky,” as being “a keen artistic delight” (Bierce, “A Horseman” 3). The description of the soldier, sitting on his horse is very detailed and vivid, leaving the reader with the feeling that the horseman appears to be “almost colossal” (3). The way in which the figure of man and horse is described as being “cut with the sharpness of a cameo” (3) gives the impression that they are cold and distant. At this moment, Carter Druse is first and foremost a soldier who must do his faithful duty and kill the enemy; therefore his senses are sharpened by the importance of his situation. He has made his aim and found “a vital spot of the horseman’s breast” (4), but at that moment he recognizes the enemy to be his father. It is this defining moment of Druse’s revelation that is kept from the reader, ironically transforming Druse, from a “courageous gentleman and hardy soldier” (4), into a coward who “shook in every limb” (4).

The moment when the horseman seems to look into Druse’s “brave, compassionate heart” (4), is the moment of anagnorisis: his recognition of the situation. Therefore, this moment is what the whole story hinges on. His inner struggle is between the compassion in his heart and the intrinsic value of doing his military duty. This is one of the parts of the story which Bierce revised in his later version. In that version, after having expressed his thoughts on the possibility that there is perhaps no need to shoot the enemy, in the case that the horseman has not discovered the soldiers at the bottom of the valley, Druse ironically remembers his father’s advice to him when they parted. Bierce’s original text did not contain this information about Druse’s inner thoughts. In the original story Druse’s decision to shoot is described with the words “[d]uty had silenced conscience” (Blume 156), giving the impression that the act of shooting his father is a true battle between his conscience and his duty. However, in the revised version it says “[d]uty had conquered” (4), which can only mean that his physical courage is strong and he does not dwell on the fact that it is at his father he is aiming his gun. More importantly this later version suggests that Druse’s conscience is free of guilt, and as Blume points out, this makes “Druse’s decisions to fire seem less problematical” (156).

The way in which the third person narrator describes Druse’s thoughts when he is aiming at his father is very different in the two versions mentioned before. In the original version the reader has no insight into what triggers Druse to shoot:

Druse withdrew his eyes from the valley and fixed them again upon the group of man and horse in the sky, and again it was through the sights of

his rifle. He was calm now. His teeth were firmly but not rigidly closed; his nerves were as tranquil as a sleeping babe's—not a tremor affected any muscle of his body: his breathing, until suspended in the act of taking aim, was regular and slow. Duty had silenced conscience; the spirit had said to the body: "Peace, be still." He fired. (Blume 156)

There is nothing in this paragraph that tells the reader what Druse is really thinking but in the revised version the narrator adds more dimension to Druse's character by relating his inner thoughts. Therefore, instead of leaving the reader in the dark about Druse's thoughts, the reader is told how he suddenly remembers his father's words "as if they were a divine mandate" (4):

Druse withdrew his eyes from the valley and fixed them again upon the group of man and horse in the sky, and again it was through the sights of his rifle. But this time his aim was at the horse. In his memory, as if they were a divine mandate, rang the words of his father at their parting: "Whatever may occur, do what you conceive to be your duty." He was calm now. His teeth were firmly but not rigidly closed; his nerves were as tranquil as a sleeping babe's—not a tremor affected any muscle of his body; his breathing, until suspended in the act of taking aim, was regular and slow. Duty had conquered; the spirit had said to the body: "Peace, be still." He fired. (4)

The narrator also reveals that the aim of Druse's gun is now on the horse, instead of the rider. The effect that this information produces is quite different from the original version. In the revised version the responsibility of Druse's action lies with his father, he being the one who requested Druse to do his duty, no matter what, on the other hand, in the original version Druse acts on his own account, with no intervention from anything divine, just a cold and concentrated act of duty. Blume also comes to this conclusion in his analysis, saying that in the revised version Druse's conscience is altered from the enemy to the associate, because, "Druse's conscience is now represented by his father's 'divine mandate,' which Druse plucks from his (revised) memory in order to fire the necessary shot that causes his father's death" (157). Therefore, Druse's decision to lower his aim and shoot the horse instead of the rider is not the act of a mad person; it is the act of a soldier who silences his conscience to perform his duty.

Bierce's own experience from the war definitely stayed with him and influenced his revision of the story. The revised story is Bierce's approach to show the reality of situations that were brought about in the war, and by letting his main character perform his military duty without becoming mad in the process, sharpens the theme he aims to expose. There is not the question of ethics when a mad person performs a questionable act; it only calls for pity from the reader instead of compassion. The fact that the plot in Bierce's war stories is based on real events gives them a more realistic appearance, so it is vital that the characters also appear as realistic as possible. Therefore, the perfectly sane character in the revised version is more likely to appeal to the reader than the insane one in the original version.

Richard O'Connor writes in his biography on Ambrose Bierce that "war was the making of Bierce as a man and a writer" (22). He also states that Bierce's experience was significant to his writer's career and that his experience helped his imagination to gain a viewpoint which "goaded him toward describing – in the most precise and coolly recollected detail any participant has managed – what he felt and experienced" (22-23). Another point that has to be taken into account is that a considerable time had passed from when the Civil War took place until the time when Bierce wrote the story, and in that time he had become a husband and a father. In his study on Druse, Blume draws attention to Mary Grenander's view in her book *Ambrose Bierce*, where she states that the reason why Bierce is portraying Carter Druse in an entirely sympathetic way in the revised version is because of the fact that he had lost his son shortly before the second version was printed. His son Day's death had occurred in a shooting incident over a woman and Blume points out that Grenander's argument is based on Bierce's first reaction which were "reportedly words of approval: 'You did just right, Day'" and subsequently, "[i]n this light, Grenander is suggesting that the changes Bierce made to his story reflect his desire to show that Carter Druse 'did just right' too" (371). All in all, it is a fact that Bierce's personal feelings are reflected in his revised version of Carter Druse.

From a narratologist's point of view the way in which the final moments of Druse's father is given to another character, describing it as an amazing but terrifying event is an example of Bierce's exceptional skill when it comes to influencing the reader's mind. It is not Druse who tells the reader about this "incredible truth" (5), but an officer who had wandered off "with aimless feet" (5). Therefore, the description becomes completely independent from the main story and develops into a story within

the story. This new narrator has no personal bonds with the descending officer on the horse, and consequently, his experience is quite different from what Druse's would have been. The narrator describes the horseman in details "[s]traight upright sat the rider, in military fashion, with a firm seat in the saddle, a strong clutch upon the rein to hold his charger from too impetuous a plunge" (5). The entire description aims to show the horseman in some kind of heroic haze and he is not falling, he is flying, and hence, giving the officer the false impression of the horseman's landing spot. The officer's misconception sends him looking for the horseman far from where he actually landed, or as Bierce ironically puts it "he ran rapidly obliquely away from the cliff to a point distant from its foot; thereabout he expected to find his man; and thereabout he naturally failed" (5), the reason of course being that,

[i]n the fleeting instant of his vision his imagination had been so wrought upon by the apparent grace and ease and intention of the marvellous performance that it did not occur to him that the line of march of aerial cavalry is directly downward, and that he could find the objects of his search at the very foot of the cliff. (5)

This "aerial cavalry" refers to the balloons and aeronauts that during the Civil War were employed by both sides, and used to carry out aerial inspection and artillery spotting (Shenk). The use of these aerial cavalries "gave military leaders a platform that allowed them to see for miles around – a decided advantage, especially in areas with little topography" (Shenk).

Topography being Bierce's specialty during the war (Fatout 391) gives importance to his unique way of describing the fall of the horse from the cliff and applies the irony to the scene, because, the horseman could see for miles around in the same way as the balloons "gave military leaders a platform that allowed them to see for miles around" (Shenk), but his flight was a fall, and he ended up dead on the ground beneath the cliff, hence, the irony lies in the fact that the horseman in the sky is falling to his death while the officer admires his impressive "flight" and therefore, as Blume points out "the officer's presence serves mainly to provide comic relief as he searches for the man and horse a half-mile from the foot of the cliff" (Blume 160).

As shown above, Carter Druse's parting from his father is significantly different in the two versions mentioned. The question of duty versus conscience occurs both in relation to Druse's father and his mother. There can be no doubt about the fact that he feels more responsibility towards society than to his family, as is established through

the interaction between him and his father on Druse's leaving his childhood home. This question is also the main theme in Druse's last encounter with his father, where he again chooses other duties than the familial ones, and at the same time he somehow silences his conscience, or does he simply go mad? The portrayal of Druse as a mad man does not survive Bierce's revision and Bierce's own experience; both from the war and his personal life, influence him in the revision. Therefore, by altering the ending, giving Druse full control over his feelings in the final act, gives the revised version a more realistic appearance, and consequently, sharpens the plot of the story, namely, to expose Carter Druse's military ambition.

4. Duty v/s Courage in the Face of Fortitude

The impact that stories have on the reader varies and a short story can be more effective than a novel, because what matters most is not the amount of words, but rather how intensely the words are used. Ambrose Bierce's short stories are a good example of how a story that only covers five or six pages can still affect the reader immensely. To capture the horror of a war that he knew from his own experience, Bierce uses his exceptional skill in structuring the narration so that the end will always be a cruel surprise to the reader. His fascination with macabre tales along with his use of caustic remarks and irony keeps the reader in suspense. He also uses structure to add tension to his stories, and his trademark, the final surprise twist often leaves the reader utterly bewildered. His ironical approach together with his dark mood is one of the reasons for his legendary fame, and even though he is, as David Stuart Davies puts it in his introduction to *Terror by Night* "not for the casual reader" (VIII), his legacy lives on through the stories he created, and his "writing can be enjoyed for its literary qualities and humor" (Silbey 189).

As stated before, Carter Druse's story is divided into four chapters which are not in chronological order. They revolve around the three central events of the story, first, Druse's decision to leave his sick mother, and secondly, his relationship with his father and finally, his decision at the end, to shoot the horseman. The third and final event is the defining moment of the story, and for that reason the struggle between the choice of acting and not acting becomes the achievement of a character, and not the result of events relating to the shooting. This is one more example of Bierce being true to what Aristotle had discovered, and as he puts it in his own words, the plot's solution "ought to come from character itself and not as in the *Medea* from stage mechanism and in the *Iliad* in the events relating to the sailing away of the Greeks" (Gilbert 90). There is no escaping the fact that both choices will have great consequences and Druse's final decision underlines Bierce's statement: this was not a glorious war, and as Berkove states "[h]e found the Civil War to be grim, and he refused to apply his considerable literary powers to making it seem romantic" (5).

Where does Druse's duty lie, and what does his real responsibility consist of? Even though he is a soldier, he is also a civilian in his heart, a son, and the enemy is not just a soldier of the opposition, but also his father. This situation calls for the reader to

contemplate on the morality of his action, shooting the horse, and in doing so, killing his own father. Both Blume and Berkove have commented on how Bierce's narrator in the revised version shows the reader a deeper understanding of Druse's thoughts at the time of this terrible realization. Berkove points out that "[t]he tiny gesture of slightly lowering his rifle to aim at the horse is the only concession he can make to compassion" (106). The difference between the original and revised version lies in the fact that the reader is given the opportunity to rationalize Druse's action in the later version. This is most certainly not what Bierce is aiming to do, his agenda being to uncover the futility of this tragic war which "impress haunted him for the rest of his life" (Grendander 25).

Bierce's own experience is bound to influence both the portrayal of Druse the civilian and Druse the soldier. Therefore it is his need to expose the senselessness of the war that ultimately drives him to portray Druse as a perfectly normal young soldier who has to face the consequences of his action, without the sanctuary of madness. Literary critics are not in agreement on the quality of Bierce's revision. Blume points out, that by changing the ending in this way, Bierce is taking some of its power away, and according to his comprehension, the original text "contains evidence of the great inner psychological turmoil that has pushed Druse beyond the edge of sanity" (158). This is not how Grenander interprets Bierce's change of heart, and as stated before, she takes into account his personal loss and says that "Bierce had learned, from the tragic experience of his own life, that it was possible to survive the most shocking loss and still retain one's reason" (128).

To compare these two endings it is necessary to read closely how the event is transformed from fantasy in the original text to reality in the revised text. The difference lies in the words spoken by Carter Druse when a federal Sergeant who has "crept cautiously to him" (6) asks him if he had fired. Druse replies with a yes, and tells the Sergeant that he shot "[a] horse. It was standing on yonder rock – pretty far out. You see it is no longer there. I am a great marksman; you know I once shot a match with the Devil in hell and beat him" (Blume 157). This statement on Druse's behalf clearly reveals his madness at this point. His further reply also shows the reader that he is not sane; he is imagining that the horse he shot is not an ordinary horse, "[D]o you mean the horse which had wings?" (157). In this version, Druse's madness is apparent, and he is in no condition to relate any sense to his doings, in the revised text however, he is fully aware of his actions and therefore, he is doing what the war demanded of men, to temporarily set aside their personal feelings and friendship toward men that war had

made their enemies. This portrayal of Druse as perfectly sane is, according to Blume, not as realistic as the original text, and he points out that by not emphasizing Druse's madness the conclusion leaves the reader with "a hesitant, emotionally taut, yet strictly sane and factual military account on Druse's part of his action" (157). This is partly true and even more importantly, exactly what Bierce is aiming at in his portrayal of Druse and therefore the revised version is a better example of Bierce's technique than the original one. In the revised text the horse no longer has wings; Carter simply explains to the Sergeant that he shot "[a] horse. It was standing on yonder rock – pretty far out. You see it is no longer there. It went over the cliff" (Bierce, "A Horseman" 6), and, as should be expected, the horse simply falls. There is no need for Druse's madness; the madness is in the act itself and, his circumstances create the shocking effect that Bierce is aiming to achieve.

Bierce's relationship with his father is said to have been lacking in emotions and partly for that reason his portrayal of Druse's father is tainted with his own perception of the father figure. His father's name was Marcus Aurelius, that is to say, his father had the same name as a Roman Emperor. With this in mind, the description of the horseman, in some ways, resembles an imperial figure. For example, when Druse first sees the horseman he describes it with the words "[t]he figure of the man sat the figure of the horse, straight and soldierly, but with the repose of a Grecian god carved in the marble which limits the suggestion of activity" (3). The use of marble in this description is a symbol of the coldness that the son experiences from his father, which is formerly established with the word "sir" when the father (in the revised version) addresses his son. Another fascinating point about his father's connection to the Roman Emperor is the fact that Marcus Aurelius wrote *Meditations*, where one of the main themes is the philosophy of service and duty. In his *Meditations* Marcus Aurelius states that "[h]e often acts unjustly who does not do a certain thing; not only he who does a certain thing" (Hutchins 292), and to put it into context with Bierce's story, Druse would have acted unjustly to the five regiments below the cliff, if he had not performed the act of shooting.

It is interesting to look at Bierce's use of language and how he creates ambiguity by playing on various meanings of a word. A good example of this is the word "laurel". This word has more than one meaning according to the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*, one being the noun "laurel" which means "evergreen shrub with smooth, shiny leaves, used by ancient Romans and Greeks as an emblem of

victory” (“Laurel”). This meaning relates to Bierce’s portrayal of the horseman being as calm as a Grecian god, and also, it is ironically related to his father’s Roman name. Druse is lying in “a clump of laurel” (1), which is the emblem of victory, while he fires, and his is the victory over the enemy. “Laurel” can also be used in the sense to “look for one’s laurels” meaning “beware of losing one’s reputation; be on the look-out for possible successes among rivals” (“Laurel”). Druse knows that when he fell asleep at his post he committed a criminal act and if he had been spotted lying in “the clump of laurel” (1) he would have lost his reputation and consequently it would bring dishonour to his father as well, or as Grenander points out in her analysis, Druse, knowing his father’s “exalted notion of honor, such a fate for his son would be a terrible burden for him to shoulder” (126). She also points out that if Druse’s father had lived to report the existence of the five regiments, Druse’s “defection would be apparent; and he would be meted the punishment his dereliction deserved” (126). The word “laurel” can also mean “win/gain one’s laurels, win reputation, honour” (“Laurel”). Druse is most certainly “on the look-out” for enemies and his “successes among rivals” depend on his performance. Hence, Druse is ironically performing an act that is related to the meaning of the word “laurel”, he is trying to preserve his reputation. In his book *The Devil’s Dictionary*, Bierce gives his own description of the word “laurel” which has a typical Biercian twist, “a vegetable dedicated to Apollo, and formerly defoliated to wreath the brows of victors and such poets as had influence at court. (Bierce 69). This use of the word “laurel” is one more example of Bierce’s wit and sarcasm, and perhaps more importantly, his way of being subtle in portraying the relationship between him and his father.

5. Conclusion

The theme of Ambrose Bierce's short story "A Horseman in the Sky" is the cruelty and horror of the Civil War, and the plot of the story is a young man's struggle between patriotism and familial duties. The feature of the plot is cleverly directed through the four chapters of the story which are deliberately not in chronological order, consequently creating mystery to the theme's progress. Bierce's unique ability to always surprise his readers in the last few sentences of a story is exceptionally lucid in the story of Carter Druse. It is only at the very end that the reader is given the full account of Druse's action, and as J. Berg Esenwein points out in his book *Writing the Short-Story* an effective climax is vital to a successful plot and therefore if the reader's interest "is not aroused by, it is at least greatly increased by, the complication in the plot, by the crisis in the affairs of the characters, and you eagerly wait for the unfolding" (Esenwein 75).

The critical studies on the story of Druse are not in agreement when it comes to portraying Bierce's intention concerning the character of Carter Druse. Blume and Berkove both have written concise critical studies on Bierce's short story collections, and as the examples above show, these studies reach different conclusion on how to interpret Bierce's intention. Mary Elizabeth Grenander Ph.D., with a dissertation on Ambrose Bierce has also tribute to the literary criticism of Bierce which is different from the formerly mentioned studies and all these versions show how deceptive Bierce can be. As stated above, there is no one way to interpret Carter Druse's character and actions, on the other hand, and perhaps more importantly, there is sufficient evidence in the text, even though it is truly concise, that in his revision, Bierce is concentrating on the brutal nature of civil wars. Druse's hesitation before lowering the aim of his rifle to shoot the horse, could just as well have been caused by the fact that every enemy in this war was in some way his family, and he realizes that no matter at whom he will be aiming, the enemy will always be the emblem of his father.

Works Cited

- Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. 3rd ed. Manchester: University Press, 2009. Print.
- Berkove, Lawrence I. *A Prescription for Adversity: the Moral Art of Ambrose Bierce*. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2002. Print.
- Bierce, Ambrose. *The Devil's Dictionary*. New York: Dover Publications. 1993. Print.
- . "A Horseman in the Sky." *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge and Other Stories*. New York: Dover Publications, 2008. Print.
- . *Terror by Night: Classic Ghost & Horror Stories*. Ware: Wordsworth, 2006. Print.
- Blume, Donald T. *Ambrose Bierce's Civilians and Soldiers in Context: A Critical Study*. Kent and London: The Kent State University Press, 2003. Print.
- Davies, David Stuart. Introduction. *Terror by Night*. By Ambrose Bierce. Ware: Wordsworth, 2006. VII-XII. Print.
- Edelstein, Linda N. *The Writer's Guide to Character Traits*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Writer's Digest Books, 1999. Print.
- Esenwein, J. Berg. *Writing the Short-Story*. New York: Hinds, Noble & Eldredge, 1909. Print.
- Fatout, Paul. "Ambrose Bierce, Civil War Topographer." *American Literature*. Massachusetts: Duke University Press, 1954. 391-400. Print.
- Gilbert, Allan H. "Aristotle: The Poetics." *Literary Criticism: Plato to Dryden*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1962. 63-124. Print.
- Grenander, Mary Elizabeth. *Ambrose Bierce*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1971. Print.
- Hutchins, Robert Maynard. "The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius Antoninus." *Great Book of the Western World*. Encyclopædia Britannica, INC. Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1952. 253-310. Print.
- "Laurel." *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*. 3rd ed. 1974. Print.
- O'Connor, Richard. *Ambrose Bierce: A Biography*. Canada: Little, Brown and Company, 1967. Print.
- Shenk, Rob. "Civil War Ballooning." *Interesting Facts and Frequently Asked Questions*. Civil War Trust. n.d. Web. 16 Feb 2012.
- Silbey, Joe H. Ambrose Bierce: "A Sole Survivor, Bits of Autobiography." *Civil War*

History Jun. 1999: 188-189. Print.

Talley, Sharon. "Childhood and the Fear of Death in Ambrose Bierce's *The Parenticide Club* and 'Visions of the Night'." *American Imago* 66.1 (2009): 41-69. Print.