

# Anna Krawczyk-Łaskarzewska

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Anna Krawczyk-Łaskarzewska  
Katedra Filologii Angielskiej UWM w Olsztynie

## THE INFLUENCE OF JOURNALISTIC TECHNIQUES ON AMBROSE BIERCE'S SATIRICAL STORIES

**Reporter**, n. A writer who guesses his way to the truth and dispels it with a tempest of words.

Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil's Dictionary*

A work of literature is primarily a fruit of an individual personality and specific experience. Nonetheless, each writer lives in a particular milieu and their ideas are to a greater or lesser degree influenced by politics, economy, social institutions and attitudes, intellectual trends and popular beliefs cherished at a given period of time.

In one of the numerous manuals concerning American literature Ambrose Bierce is called "a prominent journalist and, for years, an unprominent writer"<sup>1</sup>. These words provide an excellent summary of his literary activity and lack of recognition on the part of either critics or readers. He usually evoked extreme feelings and earned numerous mutually exclusive sobriquets: bitter Bierce, God Almighty Bierce, a skeptical liberal, a misanthrope, a fighter, a realistic interpreter of life, a dandy, a titan, a breaker of images, an aesthetic Enemy of the People. Franklin K. Lane, erstwhile secretary of the Interior, considered him "a hideous monster, so like the mixture of dragon, lizard, bat, and snake as to be unnameable"<sup>2</sup>. Gertrude Atherton, one of his disciples, said that "Bierce had the most brutal imagination she had encountered in print"<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Cleanth Brooks, R.W.B. Lewis, Robert Perm Warren, *American Literature – The Makers and the Making*, Book C 1861–1911 (New York, 1975), p. 1626.

<sup>2</sup> Vincent Starrett, *Ambrose Bierce* (Chicago, 1920), p. 11.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 11.

According to Edward Said, "all attempts to divorce text from actuality are doomed to failure"<sup>4</sup>. The short stories written by Ambrose Bierce cannot be removed from the social reality of the 19th century America. This refers especially to his twenty three tall tales, also called "negligible stories", which are a product of the writer's disillusionment with the fraud and violence of the era that followed the Civil War. Bierce's profession was one of the essential factors contributing to his literary ingenuity. Working in newspapers for forty-five years was not a meaningless episode but rather an experience which enabled him to mature into a self-conscious and bold writer.

The writer's journalistic activities had also a great influence on the style and subject-matter of his satirical pieces. More importantly, to a large extent they shaped his controversial views upon the society and its wrong-doings. It should be stressed that Ambrose Bierce earned his reputation first and foremost as a journalist and his vituperative and witty articles simply electrified the public opinion in America. Bierce belonged to the few writers and thinkers of his generation who very quickly lost faith in the Jeffersonian ideal of democracy where unhampered actions of individuals automatically result in the good of the society<sup>5</sup>.

Crime and corruption in the world of business and politics, poverty of the majority of American society – all the phenomena characteristic of the transition period (accurately termed *The Gilded Age* by Mark Twain) proved that people are basically egoistic creatures motivated mainly by their own interests. Contrary to the hope of the Pilgrim Fathers who founded their first colony in 1621, America did not turn out to be a promised land, a place where everybody could achieve wealth and happiness and, at the same time, observe strict moral principles. The bitter remark contained in one of Bierce's commentaries well sums up his disgust with his fellow men: "To say of a man that he is like his contemporaries is to say that he is a scoundrel without excuse"<sup>6</sup>.

Bierce hated not only corrupted people and institutions. He could not put up with general barbarity of life in the States: crudity, conceit, tobacco-chewing, ill-dressing, bad manners, the excessive use of slang and colloquialisms. In *The Devil's Dictionary* – an astonishing lexicon of postwar atrocities and follies, printed for twenty-five years in San Francisco newspapers and only later published in a volume – he gave an ironical definition of the word "ambrosia": "The diet of the gods – the modern peanut". This brief and witty explanation suggests that, despite amazing technological and new possibilities, American culture is going to the dogs, or rather it enters a stage of profanity and disrespect for classical notions and ancient gods. Mass culture involves simplification, ignorance and vulgarity.

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<sup>4</sup> Edward Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Boston, 1983), p. 101.

<sup>5</sup> Paraphrased after Nelson Manfred Blake, *A History of American Life and Thought* (New York, 1972), p. 447.

<sup>6</sup> Jay Martin, *Harvest of Change. American Literature 1865-1914* (New Jersey, 1962), p. 116.

Bierce was aware of the fact that he lived in a materialistic society dedicated to the "great black ebony God of business" (an expression coined by another disillusioned writer, Henry James). The American *fin-de-siècle* meant a dawn of new, large-scale consumerism. This was also a time of "values in motion", of moral chaos caused by a quick pace of economic and social changes.

Journalism which was "first promoted as a response to the boredom and frustration of urban life" began to assume a much more important role – that of the only reliable source of information and reference<sup>7</sup>. Particularly during the Civil War newspaper-reading had become Americans' steady habit. In the so-called reconstruction period "more Americans knew how to read than in any large European country, and in statistical terms a Yankee had more choices in journalism than any literate man under the sun"<sup>8</sup>. The American press was used as a powerful tool of propaganda by political factions and bosses. Soon, however, the mass reader's attention was directed to business malpractices: briberies, frauds or taxes which never reached the federal Treasury. A great crusade began which brought to the surface the scandalous corruption of industry magnates. One of the first journalists to take part in it was Ambrose Bierce.

In 1890's William Randolph Hearst, a legendary figure in the history of American press, hired Bierce and began a war against the mighty Southern Pacific, "publicizing all of its wrecks, even the slightest derailment, as major disasters or close shaves with destiny"<sup>9</sup>. Bierce did not hesitate to describe the railroad tycoon, Leland Stanford, as Leland Stanford – a ruthless businessman interested only in making money and cheating the American government. The crusade turned out to be successful: Stanford had to give back some of the government subsidies and Bierce paved the way for the following generation of young journalists who believed that through the printed word they would reform the guilty American society. Indeed, Bierce deserves to be called one of the forerunners of the so-called muckraking journalism.

Years of journalistic practice turned out to be the most important factor determining Ambrose Bierce's view upon man and their environment. On the other hand, they were also a formative period for him as a writer. By continuous efforts to describe the hectic reality of the 19th century America, Bierce was able to develop his own style which singles out not only his provocative editorials and "town crier" columns, but also his satirical stories and brief fables. He achieved nearly classical precision and clarity of diction. The language used in his literary works is devoid of slang expressions and obscenities which, too often in his times, served as the only means of amusing the mass reader. It was rather in the field of journalism that he

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<sup>7</sup> *The Newsmongers. Journalism in the Life of the Nation 1690-1972* (New York, 1973), p. 259.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 194.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 264.

showed his skill as a master of abuse, especially when describing the hypocrisy and corruption of local celebrities.

Critics who analyzed or provided scanty comments upon Bierce's satirical stories rarely took into consideration the obvious link between his literary and journalistic works. It could be argued, however, that most of the satirist's "negligible stories" were written in accordance with typically journalistic techniques and it is only the fictitiousness of the presented world and the first person narration that distinguishes them from cover stories devoted to murders in the cities of 19th century America. Sadly, brute episodes which can be found in Bierce's satirical stories do not differ from the headlines of daily newspapers published during that period. "Indeed, there was plenty of crime and violence in American life so that the problem in metropolitan newspaper offices was not how to report all the news, but how to fit a day's events into five or six columns, after the classified ads before the patent-medicines ones"<sup>10</sup>.

Bierce wrote his editorials and satirical sketches during a time when truly modern journalism only started to develop. For example, the technique of interview was used in the United States for the first time in 1858. After the Civil War editors and reporters began to excel in seeking out the sensational, in shocking people with detailed accounts of homicides, robberies or court trials, or political and financial scandals. The tendency to present events in an exaggerated, out-of-proportion way and a constant attack upon the reader's nerves proved to be a highly effective strategy.

A real revolution took place as far as the organization of paragraphs in cover stories was concerned. In order to attract the mass reader, reporters began their articles with the so-called "lead" – an introduction which briefly suggested the content of the whole story which, in turn, was ended with a carefully chosen summing-up sentence – usually a surprising twist modifying the reader's attitude or expectations toward the journalistic text.

Interestingly enough, such structural techniques can be found in most of Bierce's satirical stories. Let us consider for example *The City of the Gone Away*, the story about a man who established a cemetery where he was supposed to bury "burdensome invalids", "wealthy testators whose legatees were desirous to come by their own [...], wives of husbands ambitious to remarry", etc.\* In the end it turns out that his prosperity was a result of selling cadavers to medical colleges and producing soap out of human remains. The very beginning of the story suggests that the narrator will resort to dishonest practices:

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<sup>10</sup> Ibidem, p. 163.

\* All quotations come from *The Complete Short Stories of Ambrose Bierce* compiled with commentary by Ernest Jerome Hopkins (Lincoln and London, 1984).

I was born of poor because honest parents, and until I was twenty-three years old never knew the possibilities of happiness latent in another person's coin. At that time Providence threw me into a deep sleep and revealed to me in a dream the folly of labor.

The summing-up paragraph brings the shocking and ironical denouement:

As to the rest, I had owned and operated the most extensive and thoroughly appointed soapworks in all the country. The excellence of my "Toilet Homoline" was attested by certificates from scores of the saintliest theologians, and I had one in autograph from Badelina Fatti the most famous living soaprano.

Another tale, *A Revolt of the Gods*, is constructed in a similar way and, despite the improbable content and facetiousness, in parts it bears an astonishing resemblance to social reportage which is still popular among the 20<sup>th</sup> century readers all over the world. The story deals with an insurrection of hungry cats which "held a mass-meeting and marched in procession through the streets, swearing and spitting like fiends" because the narrator's mother – an owner of the only shop in the city selling cats' meat – refused to sell the food until her husband could be reemployed as "a deodorizer of dead dogs". At the very beginning of the story the narrator describes the professions of his parents and regretfully observes:

They did not live happily; the difference in social rank was a chasm which could not be bridged by the vows of marriage. It was indeed an ill-assorted and most unlucky alliance; and, as might have been foreseen, it ended in disaster.

The concluding paragraph provides an unexpected perspective to the whole story:

The stirring events of those few days constituted my industrial education, and so well have I improved my advantages that I am now Chief of Misrule to the Dukes of Disorder, an organization numbering thirteen million American workingmen.

Having read this passage, one might be tempted to state that, occasionally, some very realistic concepts flash through the totally improbable story. On the whole, however, the world described in *A Revolt of the Gods* and in most of Bierce's satirical stories is "unreal". It almost seems that the reader is purposefully alienated from the characters and situations in Bierce's tales. This carefully planned unfamiliarity brings inevitable associations with the dramatic technique of *Verfremdungseffekt* used by Bertolt Brecht in his 20<sup>th</sup> century plays. However, a closer look at those tales reveals the writer's skill in presenting a frighteningly coherent "reality". The word "coherent" does not exclude the possibility of saying that the story and its characters are unbelievable. What counts is Bierce's successful game with the reader who is compelled to recognize this autonomous, fictitious world.

The magical effect – the improbable becomes credible – is usually achieved through the first person narration. The narrator invariably takes part in the related events, most often as one of the malefactors, and although he can sometimes be referred to as a psychopath (after all, he commits singularly hideous crimes), his

motivation is perfectly understandable to the reader who belongs to the so-called normal world. Bierce's satirical purpose is evident – the structure of his tall tale stories is dependent on and unified by the presence of degenerate characters whose mean acts are paralleled by the crimes described in nonliterary circumstances by "real" newspapers and discussed by the reader in everyday life.

In a sense, Bierce equates the narrator and the reader by presenting incredible villains whose crimes are credible and easy to explain because they do not differ from the practices of some murderers living in the nonfictitious society. Bierce's provocation consists in caricaturing the social order as if it were presented in a distorted mirror.

It is true that some of the satirical stories written by Bierce are not that bitter and sarcastic. In fact, a few of them do not deal with murders, robberies or corruption. Nevertheless, the writer's game with the reader is essentially the same: the fictitious world is usually filtered through solely by the narrator, and this pattern is rarely abandoned in the "negligible stories". A change of literary strategy can be treated here rather as an exception to the rule, and sometimes it spoils the writer's intention and the artistic effect he wanted to achieve. This happens in the case of *A Cargo of Cat* – a story which seems to be an unconvincing mixture of a journalistic account and a typical tall tale. A careful analysis of the tale in question leaves some doubts as to whether its numerous stylistic incongruities are deliberate or unintended.

The story deals with unexpected consequences of transporting too many cats below the deck of one ship. Some of the animals get swollen because of sea water, explode into the air and then fall down on the deck of the ship, strike up a "hymn" (their "concert" lasts many days), and spring "spitting into the sea" in order to reach the African shore. The résumé of the story suggests that *A Cargo of Cat* belongs to the tradition of a tall tale – a genre which was immensely popular with the Western American audience. But the narrator does not present the exaggerated content in the deadpan manner (a characteristic feature of a good tall tale) so that the reader or hearer could fall for his hoax (another proof that the story is an effective tall tale). Instead, he is full of ironical detachment which undermines the credibility of *A Cargo of Cat*. This is, for instance, how he describes the "smooth, square column of cat":

I have stood at Naples and seen Vesuvius painting the town red - from Catania have marked afar, upon the flanks of AEtna, the lava's awful pursuit of the astonished rooster and the despairing pig. The fiery flow from Kilauea's crater, thrusting itself into the forests and licking the entire country clean, is as familiar to me as my mother-tongue. I have seen glaciers, a thousand years old and quite bald, heading for a valley full of tourists at the rate of an inch a month. I have seen a saturated solution of mining camp going down a mountain river, to make a sociable call on the valley farmers. I have stood behind a tree on the battle-field and seen a compact square mile of armed men moving with irresistible momentum to the rear. Whenever anything grand in magnitude or motion is billed to appear I commonly manage to beat my way into the show, and in reporting it I am a man of unscrupulous veracity; but I have seldom observed anything like that solid gray column of Maltese cat!

Usually, the source of humor in Bierce's stories is in the very improbability of a given situation. It seems that the narrator in *A Cargo of Cat* usurps the role of a comic but his satirical intrusions lessen the coherence and the humorous effect of the tale:

"Captain Doble", I said, respectfully touching my hat, which was really not worthy of respect, "this floating palace is afflicted with curvature of the spine and is likewise greatly swollen".

Without raising his eyes he courteously acknowledged my presence by knocking the ashes from his pipe.

"Permit me, Captain", I said with simple dignity, "to repeat that this ship is much swollen".

"If that is true", said the gallant mariner, reaching for his tobacco pouch, "I think it would be as well to swab her down with liniment. There's a bottle of it in my cabin. Better suggest it to the mate". [...]

Sadly and silently I turned from that obdurate man and walked forward.

Strikingly, the narrator's account oscillates between a literary description:

The ship's fastenings were all giving way; the water on each side was lashed into foam by the tempest of flying bolts that she shed at every pulsation of the cargo. She was quietly wrecking herself without assistance from wind or wave, by the sheer internal energy of feline expansion.

and a journalistic account:

On the 16<sup>th</sup> day of June, 1874, the ship *Mary Jane* sailed from Malta, heavily laden with cat. This cargo gave us a good deal of trouble. It was not in bales, but had been dumped into the hold loose. Captain Doble, who had once commanded a ship that carried coals, said he had found that plan the best.

On the other hand, the narrator is not a sailor on the ship and he admits that his interest in the whole event is primarily journalistic. Knowing Bierce's ambiguous attitude towards journalism, it is possible to assume that he created his unconvincing narrator deliberately, in order to ridicule the style of writing often found in newspapers or magazines. The phrases used by the narrator are occasionally marred by journalese, e.g. "The southern extension of Italy, as every schoolboy knows, resembles in shape an enormous boot". However, *A Cargo of Cat* is not only a burlesque, a parody of linguistic clichés and rhetorical devices used by journalists. It is important to note that the story gets plausible in those parts which draw on the tall tale tradition, for example when some pseudo scientific and at the same time exhilarating assumptions are made:

You have seen a dead cat in a pond: you remember its circumference at the waist. Water multiplies the magnitude of a dead cat by ten.

Five out of the twenty-three "negligible tales" are linked with the world of journalism as far as their subject-matter is concerned. The writer presents editors, reporters and newspapers in a grotesque way, openly ridiculing their partisanship,

corruption and lack of reliability. Bierce, a journalist himself, does not hesitate to suggest that what the press has to offer is a great cynical humbug created only to deceive readers and procure power for political bosses financing it. The ethical principle of professional and honest journalism – to act for the good of the whole society – is virtually nonexistent in the practices of Bierce's characters. "Mr. Masthead, Journalist", another "journalistic" story by Bierce, leaves no doubts as to the actual function of the press:

While I was in Kansas I purchased a weekly newspaper – the *Claybank Thundergust of Reform*. This paper had never paid its expenses; it had ruined four consecutive publishers; but my brother-in-law, Mr. Jefferson Scandril, of Weedhaven, was going to run for the Legislature, and I naturally desired his defeat; so it became necessary to have an organ in Claybank to assist in his political extinction. When the establishment came into my hands, the editor was a fellow who had "opinions", and him I at once discharged with an admonition. I had some difficulty in procuring a successor; every man in the county applied for the place.

The hired editor decides to denounce Mr. Scandril as a demagogue the degradation of whose political opinions was only equaled by the disgustfulness of the family connections of which those opinions were the spawn! The narrator feels rather uneasy about this editorial and points out to Mr. Masthead that it had never been the policy of the *Thundergust* to attack the family relations of an offensive candidate, although this was not strictly true.

The story ridicules some rhetoric devices used by the press propagandists during the election campaigns in America. One of the editorial articles by Mr. Masthead is published under the title *Invigorating Zephyrs*. The author's militant attitude is blended with a sense of mission and moral justification: "Last week we declared our unalterable opposition to the candidacy of Mr. Jefferson Scandril, and gave reasons for the faith that is in us. For the first time in its history this paper made a clear, thoughtful, and adequate avowal and exposition of eternal principle!" Any arguments contrary to Mr. Masthead's views are described by him as being "raised [...] by dogs of political darkness".

In *Corrupting the Press* similar irony and disillusionment with the world of journalism are voiced. The very title of the story reveals its content. The narrator – this time a member of a political faction – takes active part in trying to "convince" the editor of a local newspaper that the latter should back up the interests of the party:

When Joel Bird was up for Governor of Missouri, Sam Henly was editing the Berrywood *Bugle*; and no sooner was the nomination made by the State Convention than he came out hot against the party. He was an able writer, was Sam... and the lies he invented about our candidate were shocking! That, however, we endured very well, but presently Sam turned squarely about and began telling the truth.

This was a little too much; the County Committee held a lusty meeting and decided that it must be stopped; so I, Henry Barber, was sent to make arrangements

to that end. I knew something of Sam: had purchased him several times, and I established his present value at about one thousand dollars.

"Base Endeavor to Bribe the Editor of this Paper with a *Twenty-Dollar Note!*", as one of the headlines quoted in the story goes, turns out to be unsuccessful. A chain of unexpected events follows, as a result of which the narrator is forced to leave the city and has to give up looking after his "political and material interests there".

*Why I Am Not Editing "The Stinger"* deals with another subject – a revenge taken by a man who feels insulted by an article devoted to him by J. Munninglut, the "Stinger" editor. For several days, the man occupies the "Stinger" office, terrorizes the newspaper's staff with a bull dog and keeps waiting for the thoughtless editor. Finally, he decides to leave and installs a shotgun in front of the "Stinger" office, probably in order to blow the building into pieces.

The frightened editor never shows up in the office and finds numerous excuses for avoiding the hero of his article. He even moves to another apartment and, in a letter to the proprietor of the "Stinger" office suggests hiring another editor "for, say, fifty years".

The story consists of sixteen notes exchanged between the alarmed proprietor, the editor, the bookkeeper, and the foreman of the staff during the intruder's presence in the office. This structure, quite unusual in Bierce's short forms, builds up the climax and creates constant suspense in the story. The most ironical fragment of *Why I Am Not Editing "The Stinger"* is the one in which the editor asks the newspaper proprietor the following question: "Do you happen to remember how Dacier translates *Difficile est proprie communia dicere?* I've made a note of it somewhere, but can't find it".

Characteristically, the satirical piece only mirrors the situations which often took place in 19<sup>th</sup> century America. As there was no strictly established press law at that time, journalists often felt free to publish unconfirmed information or personal attacks on politicians, financiers, artists. In return, they had to be prepared for their targets' revenge (most often, there was no other way to settle the heated dispute between the two interested parties). According to Robert Rutland, a press historian, "a search of the files of the *New York Herald*, *Washington Globe*, *Louisville Journal*, or *Richmond Enquirer* for the period reveals the politicians, lawyers, farmers, salesmen, sailors, and a wide cross-section of American manhood often resorted to the gun or cane when they believed their pride had been injured or their pocketbooks abused"<sup>11</sup>.

The two remaining "journalistic" stories deserve to be treated as particularly strong satires on the manipulative techniques of the press. *The Bubble Reputation (How Another Man's Was Sought and Pricked)* is a quasi-supernatural tale set "in a

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<sup>11</sup> Ibidem, p. 162.

stormy night in the autumn of 1930" (Bierce wrote it in 1880). It deals with dead inhabitants of Sorrel Hill cemetery, specifically with the deceased editor of the San Francisco *Daily Malefactor* who orders his reporter to write about "one Inhumio's" "grossest outrages in the administration of the cemetery" (e.g. due to Inhumio's policy "males and females are permitted to occupy the same quarters, to the incalculable detriment of public morality"). A few days later, the *Daily Malefactor* publishes the young ambitious reporter's article full of scandalizing exclamations and exaggerated headlines. The description of the journalist in the story is humorous and at the same time ironical. He is said to have "a most uncanny and disquieting aspect". While walking among the graves of the cemetery, he wears

a long black cloak. Upon (his) head was a slouch hat, pulled down across the forehead and almost concealing the face, which was further hidden by a half-mask [...]. His arms were concealed, but sometimes he stretched out the right to steady himself by a headstone as he crept stealthily but blindly over the uneven ground. At such times a close scrutiny of the hand would have disclosed in the palm the hilt of a poniard, the blade of which lay along the wrist, hidden in the sleeve. In short, the man's garb, his movements, the hour - everything proclaimed him a reporter.

*The Little Story* refers to both literary and journalistic practices in 19<sup>th</sup> century America and mercilessly ridicules the taste of the reading audience. A probationary contributor reads a manuscript of his story about a poor girl begging in the streets of San Francisco to one of the editors of *The Expounder*. The story is constructed in the form of dialogue, which dramatizes the action and prepares the reader for the knocking-down ending. The reading of the little story is frequently interrupted by the editor's remarks. The editor is well aware of the fact that the story has been reworked many times and published in numerous newspapers and magazines, with minor corrections suited to the readers' potential reaction. The writer proudly admits: "this little story has never been rejected by any paper to which I have offered it. It gets better, too, every time I write it".

The girl from the tale dreams about food and suddenly her dream comes true – tons of different goods start pouring from the sky above. Ironically, the poor girl is dug up with the stuff. After a while, she is uncovered by "the good merchants" who "arrived upon the scene" and took the goods to their own cellars and "nicely arranged them on their shelves, ready for sale to the deserving poor". "When they had got down to the wicked little orphan who had not been content with her lot some one brought a broom, and she was carefully swept and smoothed out".

Even more ironical twist occurs at the very end of the story when the girl's flattened body is carried to the coroner. That functionary's reaction is surprisingly reluctant:

with a deprecatory wave of his hand, he said to the man who was bearing her: "There, go away, my good fellow; there was a man here three times yesterday trying to sell me just such a map".

Stylistically, *The Little Story* bears a striking resemblance to Jonathan Swift's *Modest Proposal* and is one of the few tales in which Bierce openly criticizes not only the principles cherished by the society of his time, but also the worsening life conditions and extreme poverty in his country. But such straightforwardness is rarely found in Bierce's writings. He prefers satire to sentimentality and ironic detachment to careful examination of social irregularities.

Thanks to his journalistic experiences, Bierce was able to write innovative satirical stories which form a bridge between his war and horror stories and his newspaper articles. The twenty-three "negligible stories" show strong influence of journalistic style and topics cherished by the press. The sensational prevails in Bierce's short pieces; he stuffs them with blood and gore episodes so typical of the gutter press. At times, for example in *My Favorite Murder*, he delights in presenting some ghastly crime to the smallest detail, as if he wanted to discourage even the greatest fans of violence and brutality in print. On the other hand, he never hesitates to destroy the horrible effect by some tongue-in-cheek intrusions and slightly absurd comments.

Bierce's fictitious world is unified by stylistic devices which do not differ very much from those used in newspapers. He avoids flowery writing and if he inserts some long and complicated words, it is usually for the purpose of ridiculing a given character. He is very straightforward and he enjoys striking titles and linguistic puns. Such titles as *An Imperfect Conflagration*, *My Favorite Murder*, *A Shipwreckollection* or *Corrupting the Press* sound intriguing and are meant to draw the reader's attention, similarly to scandalizing headlines in popular magazines. The same purpose is achieved thanks to the singular structuring of his stories. Often they begin with a shocking confession or seemingly preposterous description; their denouement is usually ironical or brings some unexpected revelation.

It seems that the choice of journalese was highly suitable – it enabled Bierce to present reality in a distorted, out-of-proportion way and, at the same time, to tease and provoke the reader by creating a very ambiguous fictitious world. His vision of civilization constituted a decisive break with the sentimental and overtly hypocritical outlook offered by the majority of American writers at that time. And it is precisely this disregard for literary standards and conventions that prepared the reader for the "disgusting" black humor novels written in the sixties by such authors as Nabokov, Barth or Heller.

Ambrose Bierce published his *Collected Works* eighty five years ago when both the reading public and the critics were not prepared to appreciate his experiments with the short story form. His "rediscovery" started in the sixties but it was in the seventies that he won academic recognition and he continued to be read, translated and commented upon throughout the following decades. Characteristically, more and more attention is devoted to Bierce's satirical pieces which have been hitherto neglected or simply dismissed.

The following couplet, written by Bierce in 1912, proves he predicted disappearing into obscurity:

Mark how my fame rings out in every zone,  
A thousand critics shouting: "He's unknown!"

Fortunately, the growing interest in his literary achievements permits of assuming that the writer's pessimism was unjustified.