

Readers' Guide

*Essential Bierce: A Selection of the Writings
of Ambrose Bierce*

Edited with an Introduction by John R. Dunlap

Timeline

This outline of notable events will help you put *Essential Bierce* in context.

- 1842 Ambrose Gwinnett Bierce is born on a farm in Meiggs County, Ohio.
- 1846 The Bierce family moves to a farm near Warsaw, Indiana.
- 1857 Bierce begins work as a printer's apprentice for the abolitionist newspaper *The Northern Indianian*.
- 1859 Bierce enrolls in the Kentucky Military Institute at Franklin Springs for a year, studying cartography, draftsmanship, English grammar, history, Latin, and mathematics before returning to Indiana.
- 1861 The Civil War begins and Bierce enlists for a three-month tour with the Ninth Indiana Volunteers. Once his tour concludes, Bierce reenlists and advances to the rank of sergeant major.
- 1862 Bierce's regiment joins Colonel William B. Hazen's 19th Brigade. Bierce serves as a topographical engineer and fights in the battles at Chattanooga, Chickamauga, and Shiloh.
- 1865 The Civil War ends with Robert E. Lee's surrender; John Wilkes Booth assassinates President Abraham Lincoln.
- 1867 Bierce travels to San Francisco on an expedition inspecting western military forts; he soon decides to leave the army and begins to search for writing jobs.
- 1868 The *San Francisco News Letter* employs Bierce as a regular columnist. He soon develops the nickname "the Town Crier."
- 1869 The Union Pacific Railroad and the Central Pacific Railroad connect to form the first transcontinental railroad in America.
- 1871 Bret Harte's *Overland Monthly* publishes Bierce's short story "The Haunted Valley." After a lengthy courtship, Bierce marries Mary Ellen ("Mollie") Day.

HEYDAY BOOKS CALIFORNIA LEGACY

P.O. Box 9145 • Berkeley, CA 94709 • Phone (510) 549-3564, ext. 309 • Fax (510) 549-1889

- 1872 Bierce resigns from the *San Francisco News Letter*. He and his wife move to London, and he becomes a contributor to the literary and satirical magazine *Fun*. His first son, Day, is born in December.
- 1874 Bierce's second son, Leigh, is born in April.
- 1875 Mollie and Bierce return separately to San Francisco. Their daughter, Helen, is born in May.
- 1877 A new magazine, the *Argonaut*, employs Bierce as an associate editor and columnist. He soon gains the nickname "the Prattler."
- 1880 Bierce resigns from *Argonaut*, moves to the Dakota Territory, and becomes the general agent for the Black Hills Placer Mining Company in order to increase his income.
- 1881 Bierce returns to San Francisco and joins the staff of the satirical weekly newspaper the *Wasp*. He resumes his "Prattler" column and begins publishing parts of *The Devil's Dictionary*.
- 1886 Bierce resigns from the *Wasp*.
- 1887 William Randolph Hearst hires Bierce as chief editorial writer for the *San Francisco Examiner*. Bierce continues his segments of *The Devil's Dictionary* and begins to publish his most noteworthy essays.
- 1888 Bierce separates from his wife, allegedly due to jealousy.
- 1889 Day Bierce commits suicide after killing his best friend in a duel.
- 1891 Bierce publishes a book of Civil War short stories, *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians*, also known as *In the Midst of Life*. The book includes Bierce's famous short story "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge."
- 1896 Bierce travels to Washington, DC, to lobby against a funding bill that would forgive railroad tycoon Collis P. Huntington nearly \$25 million in debts to the U.S. government. The bill is subsequently defeated.
- 1898 The Spanish-American War begins in April; the Treaty of Paris is signed in December, ending the war.
- 1899 Bierce moves to Washington, DC, and continues to write for the *Examiner* as well as the magazine *Cosmopolitan*.
- 1901 Leigh dies of pneumonia generated by his alcoholism.
- 1906 Bierce resigns from the *Examiner*. The San Francisco earthquake strikes northern California.
- 1909 Bierce begins publishing his *Collected Works*, a twelve-volume series.

- 1910 The Mexican Revolution begins.
- 1911 Bierce publishes *The Devil's Dictionary*, originally released in 1906 as *The Cynic's Word Book*.
- 1912 Bierce finishes publishing *Collected Works*.
- 1913 Bierce unexpectedly leaves for Mexico in order to cover the revolution. His last letter places him in Chihuahua, Mexico, heading toward "an unknown destination."
- 1914? Bierce is presumed dead.

Questions to Discuss

1. How does Bierce use everyday life experiences to scare you in his ghost stories?
2. In "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" Bierce distorts the sequence of time. How does this technique differ from other types of narration found in the "Stories" section?
3. Throughout "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," the narrator's point of view is ambiguous. Who is the actual observer in the story? Is there more than one?
4. What similarities exist between Bierce's *The Devil's Dictionary* and dictionaries of today, such as *The American Heritage Dictionary*?
5. Bierce lists similar definitions in the categories of law, politics, and religion. What connections do you see among those criticized in these sections?
6. In *The Devil's Dictionary*, Bierce denounces nearly every aspect of American society, such as capitalism and institutional organizations. What common cultural issues escape Bierce's criticism?
7. Installments of Bierce's *Dictionary* were published in weekly periodicals before being compiled into a book. What do you think Bierce hoped to accomplish by writing these satirical social commentaries?
8. In the short story "What I Saw of Shiloh," Bierce recounts his Civil War battle experience through third-person narration. What aspects of war does he emphasize? What aspects does he downplay?
9. The mind of the soldier in "What I Saw of Shiloh" is perplexing. What do you think Bierce makes of war?
10. After reading through *Essential Bierce*, consider Bierce's political position for the time period. What do you think of his politics?

Suggested Reading

Bierce, Ambrose. *Phantoms of a Blood-Stained Period: The Complete Civil War Writings of Ambrose Bierce*. Ed. Russell Duncan and David J. Klooster. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002.

Davidson, Cathy N. *Critical Essays on Ambrose Bierce*. Boston: G.K. Hall, 1982.

Gale, Robert L. *An Ambrose Bierce Companion*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 2001.

Hopkins, Ernest J., ed. *The Complete Short Stories of Ambrose Bierce*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984.

Lindley, Daniel. *Ambrose Bierce Takes on the Railroad: The Journalist as Muckraker and Cynic*. Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1999.

Saunders, Richard. *Ambrose Bierce: The Making of a Misanthrope*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1985.

Radio Segment

http://californialegacy.org/radio_anthology/scripts/bierce.html