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# The Human Body as a Site of Traumatic Narrative in Ambrose Bierce and Stephen Crane's Civil War Stories

One of the more impactful means by which the experience of war is recreated for a civilian audience is through the illustration of the human body, with lived experience and relevant literature illustrating war as an entity so powerful that it physically brands trauma onto the of soldiers. Only beginning with the American Civil War do American veterans become symbolically representative of war, and it largely is due to the human body being transformed by war: firstly as an object of killing and secondly as a site of traumatic narrative. Civil War veteran and writer Ambrose Bierce provides an illustration of this concept in its earliest American context in his 1889 short story, *Chickamauga*, which is set during the historical battle of the same name (which Bierce was a witness and participant in). This particular work by Bierce is significant in that it specifically employs the human body as a means of creating an authentic illustration of both the soldier and the veteran of the Civil War. I intend to prove this argument by providing relevant contextual information about Bierce, analyzing the corporeal imagery within *Chickamauga* by order of narrative, and finally by comparing his impact on the language of war and trauma to that of Stephen Crane, a non-veteran. The results of this examination will serve to reveal a substantial, cultural relationship between the human body and the American war narratives as they have evolved from Bierce's post-Civil War context of writing.

Bierce's position as a major figure of post-1865 literary culture is attributable to his willingness to write fiction about the Civil War when he was also a veteran of it (Kaufmann). What should be emphasized from this piece of biographical information is the fact that Bierce illustrates his experiences of war creatively and through fiction, as opposed to using the popular styles of memoir or historical documentation. Bierce's contribution to the American war narrative is revolutionary specifically because he used the language of creativity and the style of fiction to communicate his specific experiences of trauma to a civilian audience. His method of doing so is characterized especially by images and descriptions of the human body, the same physical form that he had been trained to objectify, degrade, and finally destroy during his years in combat. Bierce employs the human body as a literary device within his war stories for both narrative purposes and personal engagement with his unspeakably distressing past, in which he was a nationally endorsed murderer of his countrymen.

Furthermore, a brief chronicle of veteran-civilian relationships in the post-war era serves to culturally contextualize Bierce's artistic emphases. While the excessive brutality of the Civil War affected nearly all Americans in some form or another, it was the former soldiers who were forever affected by the events they witnessed and the actions they participated in. The distress

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and disturbance of veterans was so transformative that an irreparable chasm emerged between them and the civilian population. In physical, emotional, and mental capacities, these two groups of people were entirely and irrevocably separated on the basis of traumatic experience. Yet, as all artists seek to do, Bierce endeavored to create a literary work that would establish even the smallest of bridges between these two groups of people, which would allow the civilian population to better understand the soldier's experience and thus maintain more appropriate relationships with them. The use of the body as a site of narrative is, in this context, a method of communicating physical trauma of the veteran so that it is made to feel even slightly more experiential to all Americans, as opposed to the group of a few. In terms of making the soldier's experience of war and physical transformation more comprehensible to all individuals, *Chickamauga* emerges as Bierce's most vital illustration of the Civil War.

Published in 1889, *Chickamauga's* origins as a fictional short story arise from Bierce's participation in and witnessing of the Battle of Chickamauga, one of the many particularly bloody conflicts that Bierce would witness as a serviceman. In an artistic blending of personal experience and universal innocence, the story is centered on the thoughts and actions of a six-year-old boy. This particular assignment of the story's point of view reflects Bierce's intent that his traumatic recollections of battle be understood specifically as a corruption of innocence, which the child's immature body and mind is naturally emblematic of. Yet, Bierce burdens the child's natural state of undeveloped physicality with the mentality and spirituality of a lofty, imperialistic ideology. The narrator says, "...this child's spirit, in bodies of its ancestors, had for thousands of years been trained to memorable feats of discovery and conquest"(Bierce). The protagonist of *Chickamauga* is doomed from the moment of his introduction, and it is specifically because of a natural separation between his physical capacities as a child and his mental instincts of acting as adult who believes himself the conqueror. The boy's body is created as a representational entity of all young men who joined the army to "become" men, only to be metaphorically transformed into machines and only considered useful so long as they could kill other human beings. Bierce is thus using the language of the corporeal to foreshadow the boy's forthcoming objectification and dehumanization in the line of duty.

The next bodies described are those of the soldiers making their way through the forest after participating in the historical Battle of Chickamauga. At first described to be missing half of their entire anatomies, the narrator describes one particular soldier as having, "...a face that lacked a lower jaw—from the upper teeth to the throat was a great red gap fringed with hanging shreds of flesh and splinters of bone. The unnatural prominence of nose, the absence of chin, the fierce eyes, gave this man the appearance of a great bird of prey crimsoned in throat and breast by the blood of its quarry". Graphic imagery aside, Bierce's stress on the soldier's wounded mouth suggests that for this soldier, communication as a verbal action is permanently impossible. Bierce's illustration of the future veteran is entirely characterized by a future of physical and mental isolation from fellow humans, as well as a self-image based on the physical

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appearance of incompleteness. More than permitting and even encouraging his physical humiliation, the war has rendered him to an object of combat and a symbol of its savagery. His corporeal humiliation is complete, and war has thereby secured his dehumanized identity.

This notion of war as a system built on dehumanization is next elaborated upon on a wider scale, this time applying corporeal degradation to the army as body of broken individuals. In the soldier's "awful march to water", the soldiers are said to resemble men fleeing from their hunters. Bierce's language of the soldier's actions (obtaining water like any other being) is arguably similar to the description of pigs being led to a trough, rather than men reviving and cleansing themselves. This interpretation is substantiated by their comparison to hunted prey, but Bierce twists the metaphor by continuing to address the hunted beings as "men". Again, Bierce utilizes a repurposing of language and style in order to produce the vision of an otherwise unknowable trauma. Bierce's experimentation with language in order to suit a contemporary need for personal testimony and public acknowledgement is once again proven to be an affective communication of war experiences.

The penultimate description of a war-torn corporeal is in the image of the boy's murdered mother, which is described in the following passage:

"There, conspicuous in the light of the conflagration, lay the dead body of a woman—the white face turned upward, the hands thrown out and clutched full of grass, the clothing deranged, the long dark hair in tangles and full of clotted blood. The greater part of the forehead was torn away, and from the jagged hole the brain protruded, overflowing the temple, a frothy mass of gray, crowned with clusters of crimson bubbles—the work of a shell" The victimization of a beloved family member, especially one who was an undeserving civilian, makes the horrifying description of the body more tragic than gruesome. It is an entirely new experience of the corporeal than ones previously encountered, not because of violence but because of a personal toll of that violence. The implications of this scene are substantial specifically because they denote an uncivilized and morally dishonorable style of combat, one that is distinctively unjustifiable by the standards of conduct in battle. The body becomes a place in which the reader draws comparisons to the earlier descriptions of soldiers, allowing Bierce to expose the hypocritical irony of a system that validates the killing of some and denounces that of others.

Finally, the story's earlier foreshadowing of the boy's transformation is fulfilled when he sees his mother's body, with the narrator now observing him in the following quote: "The child moved his little hands, making wild, uncertain gestures. He uttered a series of inarticulate and indescribable cries—something between the chattering of an ape and the gobbling of a turkey—a startling, soulless, unholy sound, the language of a devil. The child was a deaf mute". Bierce ensures the circularity of the narrative by changing the boy's body in the way only war does so: through the debilitation of the physical being and a final act of humiliation towards the boy's sense of personhood. The surprise revelation that the boy is a deaf-mute conveys the

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impossibility of the trauma within the narrative while also symbolically communicating what every veteran of every war knows: war is best communicated by the silence of the experienced soldier.

Comparisons of *Chickamauga* to Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* provide an interesting juxtaposition between the nature of war from both veteran and non-veteran perspectives. Like Bierce, Crane frequently uses irony to express the irrelevancy of heroic action in a war environment. Furthermore, protagonist Henry Fleming also experiences his feelings of being dehumanized specifically through the notion of physically existing as just attachment to a collective body of soldiers. Exemplifying this conviction is his insistence that he is, "merely a part of a vast blue demonstration"(Crane), thereby suggesting Crane desired an approach towards the Civil War that reflected a "Biercian" emphasis on corporeality. The body of the soldier is shown to prove that the individual is no longer in possession of his right to personhood, and is now wholly irrelevant in all faculties other than those required of a soldier. Like Bierce, Crane appears to be lamenting of the institution of war on the basis of its routine dehumanization and the neglect with which mainstream society recognizes their true extent of their physical and emotional disadvantages. By focusing on a criticism of contemporary society instead of an illustration of battle trauma, Crane's reveals his lack of experience in combat and fails to deliver the same trauma only capable of conveyance by a veteran.

As the book continues, *The Red Badge of Courage* takes further deviations from the reality of war as Bierce has illustrated it. Henry encounters many soldiers whose physical appearances reveal narratives of trauma, but unlike Bierce, the irony of their situations is far more obvious. For example, Henry encounters a mortally wounded friend, Jim Conklin, who says the following quote: "I tell yeh what I'm 'fraid of, Henry—I'll tell yeh what I'm 'fraid of. I 'm 'fraid I 'll fall down—an' them yeh know—them damned artillery wagons—they like as not 'll run over me. That 's what I 'm 'fraid of—". Jim's fearful acknowledgement of the pending degradation of his body indicates an awareness of how war objectifies the individual and ensures the soldier's physical humiliation even in death. The scene is wholly ironic in nature; the audience knows that Henry is unreliable and in reality, he is most likely incapable of preventing the physical desecration of Jim's body. Jim's final act, a literal attempt to stand tall in the face of death but ultimately falling like any other soldier, cements irony as the central literary device used by Crane's in his use of corporeal imagery. As an endlessly utilized and contextually repetitive style of narrative, Crane again proves himself incapable of illustrating war in its accurate complexity as a lived experience.

Finally, the illustration of the human corpse in Crane's book is a realistic but far less influential force of narrative, particularly in its inability to deliver the same trauma of Bierce's experienced-based illustrations. In one of the more famous passages of the text, describing Henry's sense of peace in nature to be broken by the sight of a decaying corpse against a nearby tree trees.

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Employing expressionism as stylistic foundation of reader's experience, Crane describes the corpse with increasing levels of revolting detail, moving from, "the uniform that had once been blue" to a considerably more graphic, "Over the gray skin of the face ran little ants. One was trundling some sort of bundle along the upper lip". Like Bierce, Crane uses language to ferment a specific image of death as product of war, and while it is an accurate description of a rotting corpse, the soldier's anonymity denies the reader of the personalized trauma of *Chickamauga*. It is horrifying as a device of shock value and independently powerful, but it is substantially less devastating than the site of a murdered mother as in Bierce's story.

By discussing the subtle differences in the descriptive impact of Bierce and Crane, I have endeavored to illustrate the importance of narrative voice and authorial background in the production of the American war narrative. Bierce is the undeniable authority in creating a fictionalized war narrative, as proven by his revolutionary re-appropriation of fictional style to convey a non-fiction experience of trauma. *Chickamauga* exemplifies Bierce's profound skill in giving the audience a more universal and truthful language with which to understand both the veteran as more than a war trophy and war itself a dehumanizing and physically degrading state of life.

Bierce's legacy is further solidified by a historical and cultural legacy of illustrating war through the imagery of the body. However, the purpose of conveying trauma has been increasingly altered since the Civil War, increasingly working to reflect the high ideals of patriotic ideology. No longer the freak of nationalism and the shame of the community, the veteran now represents consummate Americanism and particularly the notion of ideal masculinity. When the Pearl Harbor attacks introduce America to her own penetrability, the bodies of soldiers and of veterans begin to represent patriotic duty, the American sense of justice, and the suggestion of military service as a means to manhood. Bierce's exploration of the how war manifests trauma through the human body is applicable to modernity because the scars of war have never left the soldier's flesh or memory, regardless of historical context. As a close reading of Ambrose Bierce proves, there is a permanent brokenness of being in anyone who experiences the reality of war for his or herself. It is the cultural failure to acknowledge this damage, as well as causes of it, which dooms America to measure patriotism by lofty standards of ideology, which continue to be symbolized by the visible and invisible scars left on every single American body of war.

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