

The spectacle of
violence in
"chickamauga" as an
analysis of human
society



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Violence as a spectacle to be viewed by others for entertainment is a part of human history that can be seen in various times and societies, whether it be the Roman gladiator games where people fought to the death or the less extreme violent sports of today such as boxing, thus indicating it is ingrained into our human nature. One need not look further for evidence to see this trend than in the popularization of first-person-shooter video games or violent action movies in modern culture. This pattern of the human psyche is no less apparent in our views of warfare, which even today, for those who have not really experienced its horrors first hand, is romanticized through its virtual counterparts. Such a viewpoint towards violence has always created a distortion of truth which shields those with no experience from its reality, possibly so that it can ultimately be accomplished by members of a society with less hesitation when needed for the "greater good".

In Ambrose Bierce's short story "Chickamauga", he initially represents a romantic view of war in the limited focal viewpoint of the mute and deaf child. The fact that the child is mute and deaf symbolizes two aspects of human society in relation to violence as a spectacle. His muteness can be related to the fact that most members of society do not speak out against spectacles of violence, either because they are afraid of reproach or they themselves enjoy it. The child's being deaf, meanwhile, symbolizes the fact that most people in society do not "hear" the truths about violence from those who experience it first hand, such as soldiers coming back from combat, and instead choose to continue their enjoyment of violence as a spectacle without realizing many of its truths. However, in much obeying to the realist fashion of writing about the realities of things, Bierce shows many

times that when people are finally exposed to the realities of violence in war, it can result in extreme trauma and emotional consequences, as can be seen in the boy's response at the end of the story: "The child...making wild, uncertain gestures. He uttered a series of inarticulate and indescribable cries...a startling, soulless, unholy sound" (Bierce 410). Today, this can be seen in the negative emotional consequences to combat veterans such as post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD, which can take years to overcome, if it is ever.

Another interesting aspect of war that can be seen in the spectacle of violence in the story and other forms of entertainment is its portrayal as being surreal. This aspect can be seen today in war movies and video games through slow motion or foggy views of intense combat situations which try to depict what some soldiers experience in real life. This surreal bizarreness of war is discussed in Keith Brower's analysis of "Chickamauga" in Magill's Survey of American Literature, where he describes how truth can many times be stranger than fiction, and how such a subjective lens may be due to the fact that war can overload one's senses. This overloading, in turn, can be attributed as being due to the high stress emotional environment, which can cause combatants to view their surroundings as dreamlike since they themselves may be in a daze over what they are experiencing. In "Chickamauga", Bierce shows this surreal part of war by describing when the boy first encounters the marching wounded soldiers: "A thin, ghostly mist rose along the water...the whole open space about him was alive with them—all moving toward the brook" (Bierce 407). This surreal setting symbolizes the foggy misunderstanding most people have about the true horrors of

violence, which can be slowly revealed to them when they begin to realize the truth, as is shown with the progressive descriptions and respective realizations of the boy in the story.

Mediums for the display of violence, such as video games and movies, have over time blurred the division between fantasy and reality in war, causing an innate fascination in people with how war really is. This can be seen in Charles May's analysis of "Chickamauga" in *Masterplots II: Short Story Series*, where he discusses the transition in the story from the boy playing in his fantasy world of war in a state of innocence to his final adult-like realization of the realities of what was really happening. One interesting societal trend that May springs from this discussion is that many men and women go into war, having been ingrained with a childlike and fantasized glorification of what it will be like, only to be shocked to their very core by its cold realities of death and destruction. This fantasized glorification can be seen firsthand in "Chickamauga", where Bierce states of the boy "He waved his cap for their encouragement and smilingly pointed with his weapon in the direction of the guiding light...Confident in the fidelity of his forces..." (Bierce 409). Here, the reader can see that the boy thinks himself a leader of this group of wounded soldiers marching on, almost as if it is a war game and he is their leader in a children's game of pretend battle. In the story, the boy's transition from innocence to realization in this matter can easily be translated to symbolize how soldiers today react when going into combat for the first time. Ingrained with the confidence of success in training for war, many can believe themselves invincible until they see the true nature of violence and horror that their waging of war has wrought in the

form of dead comrades or collateral damage caused. This experience they gain usually results in a hardening of spirit that then seeks to pass on lessons learned to the next generation of soldiers, much in the same light as an adult who wishes to pass on lessons they have learned the hard way to their children.

Another notable trend of the spectacle of violence in war that is referenced in "Chickamauga" is how easily things can turn on their heads in war and violence and how easy it is to lose sight of what is happening, possibly being caused by war's foggy nature and effects on combatants. In the course of a war's narrative, this idea can be seen in how soldiers can commit morally ambiguous acts such as mistreating enemy prisoners of war or desolating villages. Matthew Stewart analyzes this aspect of the story in his article "Phantoms of a Blood-Stained Period: The Complete Civil War Writings of Ambrose Bierce", talking about how Bierce focuses on the ironic and inglorious aspects of storytelling in war. In "Chickamauga", this can be seen where it states "Desolation everywhere...He cared nothing for that; the spectacle pleased, and he danced with glee in imitation of the wavering flames...His little world swung half around; the points of the compass were reversed. He recognized the blazing building as his own home!" (Bierce 409). Here one can see how the boy's excitement quickly turns on its head into despair upon the discovery, showing in the end the irony of his initial happiness. A modern counterpart to this could be how soldiers today could bomb an enemy position, only to find out upon reconnaissance that there was also much collateral damage that resulted that they are ultimately responsible for. This trend can have profound effects on individuals, leading

to PTSD or other war-related guilt that can plague veterans, which indirectly influences, once they reintegrate into society, society itself over time.

The idea of Darwinian influence can also be seen in both the spectacle of violence and warfare alike. This is the main point in James Baltrum's article "Bierce aboard the Beagle: Darwinian Discourse and Chickamauga", where he discusses how the marching wounded in the story resemble animals and how war is very much a competition for the survival of the fittest. This animal resemblance is directly referenced in "Chickamauga", where Bierce describes of the boy's first encounter with the walking wounded "Suddenly he saw before him a strange moving object which he took to be some large animal—a dog, a pig—he could not name it; perhaps it was a bear." (Bierce 407). Here, one can see how a combatant is symbolized as an animal. This metaphor can also be expanded to include the fact that soldiers basically act as animals that do the bidding of generals who represent their masters, as can be seen in one of the popular nicknames given to soldiers, the "dogs of war". Also soldiers, like animals, have to live in harsh environments in order to wage combat. Even more so, war represents Darwinian principles because it boils down to the idea of "kill or be killed". In wars, especially during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, enemy combatants are dehumanized in order for the killing process to not affect those who wage it as much. This dehumanization can be seen in the derogatory names given to an enemy, such as "infidel" or "fascists", and is effective because it takes the distastefulness out of the act by making it seem like it is not really them killing another human, but something less than that, such as a wild beast or bug. These ideas are taught to soldiers in training by higher commanders in

order to make them more effective at doing what needs to be done when the moment arises.

In reality, violence, especially in warfare, is something that is hard to understand without first-hand knowledge. This cloudiness of understanding is due to societal distortion and popular portrayals of warfare and violence. Understanding the trends and effects of warfare and the spectacle of violence on society, however, can help dispel these distortions and help people see war as it really is. Realist authors such as Ambrose Bierce have tried to shed light on the truths and horrors of violence as a spectacle, and there is even evidence today of this effort in popular culture, such as war movies that more accurately portray the truths about war. In contrast, however, there are also many cases in which violence remains a spectacle, simply because it has been ingrained in our human nature throughout history, and probably always will be.

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