

Stories from civil war stories: summaries and annotations essay

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Summaries

Ambrose Bierce wrote *What I Saw of Shiloh* as his memoir of the 1862 Battle of Shiloh, a Civil War conflict in which he served the Union Army that went against Confederate troops. The atrocities of war are clear in the depictions of Bierce, most notably when he recounted the defeat of the Union Army on the first day of the battle. At the same time, Bierce emphasized the follies of most of the soldiers who fought, whose desire to serve for prestige has ultimately alienated them from the people who permitted them to go to war, hence saying, “ I cannot catalogue the charms of these gallant gentlemen who had got what they enlisted for” (Bierce 14).

Bierce also captured Civil War experiences in a humorous yet ironic light in his story *Four Days in Dixie*. The main character, a Union soldier who lost track of his company in Alabama, has gone through a series of adventures in his quest to return to them. The Union soldier particularly recounts his journey on his way towards a river lined with miles of corn planted across the banks, in which he noted his ordeal in a positive tone by saying, “ One who has never seen an Alabama river-bottom cornfield has not exhausted nature’s surprises” (Bierce 22).

Self-conflict is another prevailing theme used by Bierce in portraying the effects of the Civil War, which stands out in the story *A Horseman in the Sky*. The main character, Carter Druse, is a Union soldier who killed a Confederate horseman spying on his company. Trauma soon affected Carter following his action, which led him to self-contemplation as he comprehends with the violent reality confronting him, as he “ had a strange, half-defined feeling that he had slept to the end of the war” (Bierce 29).

The Civil War proved a life-changing experience to people from both the United States (US) and the-then Confederate States of America (CSA). The Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge serves as another individualistic account written by Bierce, with the story moving around the visions of a man, Peyton Farquhar, set for execution by hanging. The vision portrayed Peyton escaping from his scheduled hanging to return to his village, which was surprisingly in its pristine, pre-war condition. However, Peyton soon realized that his escape was just his imagination, which permeated him as he was about to be executed. The story predicts in this wise: " As [Peyton] is about to clasp her he feels a stunning blow upon the back of the neck" (Bierce 40). Chickamauga tells the story of a boy, whose deaf-muteness has left him without any means of expressing himself clearly and openly. As the boy went out of his home to explore the outside world, he witnessed scenes of destruction and warfare, yet he was not able to hear or say anything about it. Upon returning home, the boy was shocked to see his home destroyed by a fire, " he stood motionless, with quivering lips, looking down upon the wreck" (Bierce 46).

A Son of the Gods, aptly titled by Bierce and also known as A Study in the Present Tense, is a story of a Union company officer who enjoys popularity due to his heroic feats. The story, written in the present tense as stated by its alternate title, embodies the intent of Bierce to strengthen the tension in his storytelling of events. Such is highly apparent in the portrayal of the story on the move of the Union company officer to storm the enemies through a single advancing line that caused the death of many of his soldiers, the " many, many needless dead" (Bierce 52).

Mirroring *A Horseman in the Sky* is another story of Bierce entitled *One of the Missing*, which revolves around the exploits of a Union soldier named Jerome Searing. A sharpshooter, Jerome went missing from his company when huge rubble fell above him, leaving him trapped. When heavy debris trapped Jerome, his loaded rifle pointed exactly on his head. Jerome, knowing that any attempt to move may cause his rifle to fire and kill him instantly, died trapped in his position. The Union soldiers who discovered the body of Jerome mistook it for that of a Confederate soldier, for “ it is so covered with dust that its clothing is Confederate gray” (Bierce 62).

Annotations

The foregoing stories by Bierce recounts his experience as a soldier who has served during the Civil War, which he sufficiently described as a tumultuous era of the US. Bierce provided graphic textual representations of his experiences during the Civil War, which has become highly apparent in *What I Saw of Shiloh*. The trauma of war proved too much to bear for many people in the US; such proved highly prevalent in *A Horseman in the Sky*, *Chickamauga* and *One of the Missing*. Delusionary images of a peaceful life became part of the general narrative of those who have experienced great misery due to the war; *The Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge* reflected such theme through Peyton, who imagined that he has returned to his hometown in the midst of his execution. Emotions flowed in *Four Days in Dixie*, where a lost Union soldier still found time to savor his experience wandering around the Alabama wilderness as he searched for his company. Finally, the combined desperation and motivation of the troops who fought in the Civil

War to attain victory served as the main theme of *A Son of the Gods*. Overall, Bierce noted that the Civil War generated many grisly images among those who experienced it, which are mostly traumatic and grotesquely graphic in nature (Bierce 1-62).

Works Cited

Bierce, Ambrose. *Civil War Stories*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications. 1994.
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