19th Century American Literature.

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Ambrose Bierce (1842-1914)

1. Biography.
   1. Ambrose was the last child of nine born to very religious parents. Although his parents taught him to love books and writing, his childhood was very unhappy and he left home as soon as he could (at 15) and never talked to his parents again.
   2. As a young man he earned the nickname “Bitter Bierce.” People said that he was always angry and that he hated humanity and was pessimistic about the future.
   3. After Bierce had spent one year in a military academy (the only formal education he ever received), the Civil War started. Bierce joined the Union Army at the age of 18.
   4. Near the end of the war Bierce suffered a severe head wound in The Battle of Kennesaw Mountain. After the war he joined a military expedition across the Great Plains and eventually settled in San Francisco, California, where he was discharged and began working as a journalist.
   5. During this time San Francisco was growing into an important literary community, and Bierce met many other important writers there, including Mark Twain, Jack London, and Bret Harte.
   6. Bierce’s personal life was a series of horrible disasters. His marriage to Molly Bierce ended when he found letters indicating she had taken a lover. One of his sons was killed in a gun battle over a young woman and his other son died of alcoholism.
   7. Bierce was a very famous writer during his lifetime. His most famous book was called *The Devil’s Dictionary*, a collection of funny definitions. An example: “Happiness, n.: An agreeable sensation arising from the contemplation of another’s misery.”
   8. In October, 1913, Bierce, then 71 years old, travelled to Mexico and joined the revolutionary army of Gen. Pancho Villa as an observer. He wrote a letter to a friend from the city of Chihuahua on December 26th saying: “I leave here tomorrow for an unknown destination.” He was never seen again.
   9. There have been many theories about his disappearance. Some say he committed suicide. He was also rumored to have been executed. Some have speculated that he never went to Mexico at all and was murdered by Indians while wandering alone through the Grand Canyon. We will probably never know.
2. Themes.
   1. War. Bierce drew on his experiences as a soldier for many of his stories.
   2. Horror. He wrote quite a few ghost stories, which were very popular at the end of the 19th Century.
   3. Poetry. Bierce was also an accomplished poet. He wrote on a variety of topics, including love and language.
   4. Dictionary. As stated above, one of his most popular works was a dictionary of humour.
3. Style.
   1. Bierce was a careful writer and scholars today consider him to be a master of English usage. His writing is very economical, which means that he doesn’t use any extra or unnecessary words.
   2. His stories also explore the dark side of human nature. Many of his stories deal with the fear or anticipation of death. He was very interested in the afterlife.
   3. Bierce thought that all people are basically evil and his literature reflects his nihilistic philosophy. The world is dark and the only thing his characters have to look forward to is the sleep of death.