

## LIBERAL ARTS

### Truth in Fiction: Roots of Disillusionment in Ambrose Bierce's Civil War Stories

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Former Union soldier and journalist Ambrose Bierce authored a number of short fiction stories on the experiences of soldiers and civilians in the Civil War. Combining gripping moral dilemmas with the macabre, these stories expose romanticized perceptions of war as constructions of popular mythos. In doing so, they hint at a deep-seated disillusionment within the author himself. Intrigued by the specter of the author's personal disenchantment with war in these stories, I determined to investigate how Bierce's experiences as a soldier influenced his creative works and whether these experiences resulted in the common theme of disillusionment found in his short stories. To do this, I first examined Bierce's personal accounts of his experiences in battle. His descriptions of fellow soldiers' injuries, commanders' incompetence, and a general sense of dismay informed my reading of his stories and showed a clear connection to his graphic imagery of the horrors and abuses of war. In addition, I consulted secondary literature to gain a better understanding of the psychological effects of fighting on Civil War soldiers. I found soldiers often had difficulty reconciling romanticized expectations with the disordered and disturbing experience of actually being a soldier. It is likely Bierce experienced this same suffering, leading him to create characters in his short stories that experience similar psychological distress. After completing this research, I concluded that Bierce's experiences as a soldier in the Civil War were highly influential to his creative works, particularly in the development of the theme of soldiers' disillusionment.

*Research advisor Robert E. May writes, "Jill Bosserman's perceptive analysis reveals how Civil War soldier-author Ambrose Bierce's ironic postwar short stories reveal the process of experiential disillusionment in modern war. Confronting horrific conditions of service and combat, soldiers jettisoned romantic notions of fighting for more realistic and sometimes surrealistic understandings."*



1928 photograph of J. H. E. Partington's portrait of Ambrose Bierce, exhibited at the World's Fair in Chicago in 1893.

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