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Freedom at Midday: Elements of Existentialism in the Works of Ambrose Bierce

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FREEDOM AT MIDDAY:

Elements of Existentialism in

the Works of Ambrose Bierce

(TITLE)

BY

Sharon A. Winn

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF

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FREEDOM AT MIDDAY:
Elements of Existentialism in
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Sharon A. Winn

An abstract of a thesis submitted in partial
fulfillment of requirements for the degree of
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Ambrose Bierce exhibited a number of elements of existential thinking both in his life and in his writing. But he was ambivalent about his philosophical stance, and it is difficult to know whether he was the utter pessimist he has been called, or whether his attitude toward the universe admitted a certain optimism.

Much of Bierce's thought parallels modern existentialism, which has three main tenets: a belief that there is no God and the universe is, therefore, irrational; a descent into despair; and a choice of life or death.

Bierce insisted that the universe is irrational, and he repeatedly discussed the death, cruelty or mutability of God. His heroes often felt the Angst of existential despair, but Bierce remained ambivalent about the alternatives in such a chaotic universe.

Bierce's war stories illustrate "the existential moment" when the hero confronts the absurd universe. Many of Bierce's heroes commit suicide in despair, but a few choose a more meaningful death, a "finite transcendence" in the face of the irrational which results in a sort of affirmation of the power of mankind within a universe of chaos. This study examines two of these stories, "The Mocking-bird" and "A Son of the Gods," with reference to the existential thought they demonstrate.

Bierce was a proto-existentialist; his approach to

the universe prefigured twentieth century existential thought, and within this framework, we find that he was not a complete pessimist, but that he discovered the very circumstances that would be the basis of optimistic existentialism in the twentieth century.

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SECTION I

Ambrose Bierce and
Existentialism

Ambrose Bierce is an enigma. Since his disappearance in 1913, both Bierce, the man, and Bierce, the author, have defied categorization by biographers and critics. Stuart Woodruff likens Bierce to a kaleidoscope: "Bierce is like a kaleidoscope: the individual elements remain the same but they form a different pattern for each viewer."¹

Trying to categorize Ambrose Bierce is rather like trying to pin water to the wall. Many critics have attempted to force him into a category, but they have succeeded only in contradicting each other. As Woodruff has pointed out, Carey McWilliams in his biography of Bierce has "given us an idea of the range of critical response in his list of terms that have been applied to Bierce: 'great, bitter, idealistic, cynical, morose, frustrated, cheerful, bad, sadistic, obscure, perverted, famous, brutal, kind, a fiend, a God, ...a poet, ...a fine satirist and something of a charlatan.'"² R.M. Lovett calls Bierce "a congeries of humors, a masochist and a sadist, a paradox...."³ Philosophical and literary labels abound. Bierce has been called a Stoic,⁸ an anti-Christian,⁵ a romantic,⁶ a quasi-realist,⁷ a romantic realist,⁸ a naturalist,⁹ a misanthrope,¹⁰ a humanitarian,¹¹ a nihilist,¹² and above all, a pessimist.¹³

Probably elements of all of these categories can be found in Bierce's work because his literary output was exceedingly diverse. He wrote newspaper columns for many years. These columns were usually satirical, lambasting

well-known 19th century people and institutions. He also wrote epigrams, a number of which were collected in The Devil's Dictionary. And, he wrote short stories, on subjects as diverse as war, ghosts and robots. So, Bierce was a journalist, a satirist, an epigrammist and a fiction writer. It is not strange that he earned so many different labels, since he turned his hand to so many different literary forms.

Generally, it has been acknowledged that of Bierce's short stories, the Civil War stories are the best.¹⁴ The structure of these stories is overwhelmingly repetitive, but the clash between youthful idealistic illusion and grim reality amidst the chaos of war is nevertheless ever provocative to the reader. The philosophical nuances in these stories are of great interest, particularly to citizens of the 20th century because they seem to be utterly nihilistic and pessimistic. As Clifton Fadiman says:

Today, over and above the simple fact that he is still generally readable, Bierce solicits our attention because he is a minor prophet of hopelessness. On August 6, 1945, the planet, with the United States in the lead,¹⁵ passed half-unconsciously into an era of despair.

With the dropping of the first atom bomb, twentieth century man rushed headlong into a predicament that still, forty years after the event, has civilization in its grip -- existential despair. Ambrose Bierce faced the moment of existential despair many years before the rest of humanity was forced to face it, and his war stories examine specimens of humanity who are actively in the throes of existential despair. "Nothing matters," Bierce was fond of saying,¹⁶

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and millions of 20th century men, in the face of possible instant annihilation, have begun to agree.

The significance of Bierce's message for the 20th century, then, is his pessimism. Or, is it?

The reader familiar with existentialism can find numerous instances of existential thought in Bierce's war stories.

So in addition to all the other categories critics have forced upon Bierce, that of proto-existentialist must be added.

But existentialism itself is a fragmented philosophy. There are nihilistic existentialists, Christian existentialists, pessimistic existentialists, optimistic existentialists, and existentialists who refuse to be called existentialists. If Bierce was a proto-existentialist, which type of existentialism was he leading up to?

Bierce, as Clifton Fadiman has so emphatically pointed out, was apparently a pessimist. Therefore, if Bierce is a proto-existentialist, perhaps he should be aligned with Sartre's pessimistic existentialism. But along with Bierce's oft repeated remark that "Nothing matters," is his insistence that "Happiness is the only thing worth having..."¹⁷ One wonders if happiness is possible in a world of unrelenting existential pessimism. Bierce's insistence on happiness as the ultimate reward in this world seems to be rather reminiscent of existential optimism because at least it admits that a state of contentment is possible in a nihilistic universe.

In fact, Bierce seems to be a 19th century Janus with

regard to existential pessimism and optimism. He cannot decide between the two poles, and this ambivalence may be the cause for the critics' inability to categorize Bierce. If his Civil War stories are considered in the light of existentialism, Bierce does, indeed, seem to waffle between total pessimism and a sort of guarded optimism. But before considering existential optimism and pessimism in his stories, one must first ascertain if there are enough elements of existential thought in Bierce's philosophical stance to justify calling him a proto-existentialist.

There are three basic steps toward existentialism that any human being makes. First, there is a recognition of pervading chaos, a meaningless or disordered universe. This recognition leads man to realization of the "absurd." "The world is meaningless, without pattern or concern, while man is full of his sense of himself: the gap between is a mark of the absurd, is the absurd."¹⁸ Second, there is a sense of dread or despair which is "the yawning chasm awaiting mankind, the void, the sense that beyond man is nothingness into which he must plunge, or from which he must retreat in disorder and anxiety."¹⁹ Finally, a person makes either a retreat into a semblance of normality which Sartre calls "Bad Faith," or a "leap into life," in which a human being imposes his "authentic self on the contingent chaos beyond."²⁰ The latter is Sartre's "Good Faith" which is his definition of the true existential man's method of coping with the absurd.

Camus offers a third alternative to the absurd and that is suicide. Man can kill himself in the face of the irrational, — but Camus then says that there is Sartre's more optimistic alternative of the leap into life through living in rebellion against chaos. Nevertheless, the third alternative should be considered in a discussion of Bierce and existentialism.

Once one has made the leap into existentialism, he must accept the two other major tenets of existentialism: the complete freedom of existential man to make choices, and his complete responsibility for those choices. Molina explains Sartre's concept of freedom like this:

In the universe pictured by Sartre, man is condemned to be free. The only limit to freedom is freedom; the only choice we cannot make is to cease being free.²²

Concomitant to complete freedom is complete responsibility for one's choices. This is rather a fine point in Sartre's philosophy because if each existential man is free to choose for himself regardless of other men, anarchy is the result. Sartre was, therefore, forced to say that any decisive action by one man serves to define all mankind.²³ The idea of responsibility implies a certain moral value in existential action, and as such serves as the basis of any ethical system that might arise from Sartre's thought.

If Bierce is to be called a proto-existentialist, at least elements of these major tenets of existential thought should be observable in his work, and certainly, one can find evidence of existential thinking in Bierce's

essays, his fiction and in the biographical material about him.

In his essay "The Absence of God," James Edie claims that the nineteenth century was the period of the death of God in Western Christian civilization. The nineteenth century was the age of Nietzsche, who proclaimed that "God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him."²⁴

Nietzsche claimed that God was a manmade product. "God is the ideal or the mirror of man. All those divine and holy attributes which mankind has placed in God as unattainable ideals, his goodness, mercy, compassion, pity, love, wisdom, justice, and so on, are in reality 'human' qualities, human experiences. Man has fashioned a God in his own image and likeness. In short, what man has worshipped is the idea of the perfect man, placed by imagination in an inaccessible and unattainable realm 'beyond' this world."²⁵

In his biography of Bierce, Walter Neale, a personal friend of Bierce's, says that Bierce, too, thought that God was manmade. "The gods he derided were the creatures of men, made by man -- gods as wicked as the mortals who made them, and as good; no better, no worse. Man created God, not God man."²⁶

Nevertheless, Neale says that Bierce did wish to believe in some sort of "life force," which he called the "essence of all things." For this "essence," Bierce "had the profoundest respect, if qualified by doubt of the existence of any orderly force in nature."²⁷ Bierce thought that

each man creates his own God, and that, therefore, there are multitudinous gods extant in the universe. The gods of the various religions were silly to Bierce even though he was tolerant of all faiths. Neale says Bierce thought that most religions "did not differ widely in essentials."²⁸ Upon the possibility that a real God had indeed revealed himself to the various religious prophets, Bierce expressed fervent hope that the possibility would be discounted because, as Neale explains:

...of the respect in which he would like to hold a personal deity. In view of the mistakes that the Jewish Jehovah and the Christian Jesus had made -- both the creations of men -- Their vacillations, Their countermanding of important orders, Their poor arrangement of the universe, with very little of this globe made habitable for man -- in view of all these mistakes, Bierce felt that he could not revere Deity as revealed by the Holy Scriptures. The antics of the multitudinous gods of men simply amused him.

Bierce, himself, in his essay on religion, says that "Religions are conclusions for which the facts of nature supply no major premises."³⁰ In the same essay, he discusses prayer, and in this discussion reveals his actual belief that there is no point to prayer because prayers are not answered, which indicates either that they are not being heard, or that there is nothing there to hear them.

That prayer is "answered" the Scripture affirms as positively and unequivocally as anything can be affirmed in words: "All things whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, that ye shall receive." Why, then, when all the clergy of this country prayed publicly for the recovery of President McKinley, did the man die? Why is it that although two pious

Chaplains ask almost daily that goodness and wisdom may descend upon Congress, Congress remains wicked and unwise? Why is it that although in all the churches and half the dwellings of the land God is continually asked for good government, good government remains what it always and everywhere has been, a dream? From Earth to Heaven in unceasing ascension flows a stream of prayer for every blessing that man desires, yet man remains unblest, the victim of his own folly and passions, the sport of fire, flood, tempest, and earthquake, afflicted with famine and disease, war, poverty and crime, his world an incredible welter of evil, his life a labor and his hope a lie. Is it possible that all this praying is futilized and invalidated by the lack of faith? -- that the "asking" is not credentialed by the "believing?" When the anointed minister of Heaven spreads his palms and uprolls his eyes to beseech a general blessing or some special advantage is he the celebrant of a hollow, meaningless rite, or the dupe of a false promise? One does not know, but if one is not a fool one does know that his every resultless petition proves him by the³¹ inexorable laws of logic to be the one or the other.

In this section of his essay, Bierce has completely knocked the supports from under the idea of a benevolent God who listens to prayers and answers them. He has called the minister either a celebrant of a meaningless rite because no one is listening, or the dupe of a false promise because someone might be listening, but He is certainly not acting as He promised. Bierce, here, seems to say either God is nonexistent or else He is uncaring, in which case he might as well be nonexistent for all the good He does humanity. Either way, God as a force in the universe is removed from the arena of mankind.

There are several instances in Bierce's work when he indicates the possibility of a living God, but a God who is either a bumbler or is cruel. In conversation, Bierce pointed out the fallibility of God, telling Walter Neale

that God was evolving, and therefore, ever changeable.

"Unfortunately, at times He would de-evolute -- backslide -- and time and again would substitute, for perfectly good commands, silly mandates -- silly, incomprehensible, frequently cruel and wholly unjustifiable. According to His own accounts, He made many mistakes, which He would sometimes undertake to correct by countermanding His previous orders. He was quick to jump to conclusions -- which accounts for the absurdity of some of them and His countermands, if He had led an army in the field, would have thrown His troops into disorder."³²

God, here, is seen as a bumbler who can't make up His mind and who constantly contradicts Himself. Such a God is of little use to man or the universe. The constant changing of this God's mind creates a situation of constant change in the universe. It creates, in fact, chaos, and a chaotic universe is, of course, one of the basic tenets of nihilism and its sister, existentialism.

The alternative suggested in Bierce's earlier passage is a cruel God. Bierce again suggests this in "A Son of the Gods" where, when the rider is killed, the narrator says bitterly, "Would one exception have marred too much the pitiless perfection of the divine, eternal plan?"³³ The key word in this quote is "pitiless." It suggests a God of hate, one who lacks the essential Christian quality of mercy. Bierce seems to say that the God of love is a myth, and that the reality is a God of hate who is pitiless in His dealings with man. Albert Camus, in his discussion of rebellion says

much the same thing.

Paradoxically, the blasphemers have injected new life into the jealous God whom Christianity wished to banish from history.

One of their most profoundly audacious acts was to recruit Christ into their camp by making His story end on the Cross and on the bitter note of the cry that precedes His agony. By this means it was possible to preserve the implacable face of a God of hate -- which coincided far better with creation as the rebels conceived it. Until Dostoevsky and Nietzsche, rebellion is directed only against a cruel and capricious divinity -- a divinity who prefers, without any convincing motive, Abel's sacrifice to Cain's and, by so doing, provokes the first murder.³⁴

Camus' definition of a rebel in the passage seems to describe Bierce, who suspected that creation was either the product of a God of hate or of a capricious divinity. Eric Solomon explains Bierce's attitude toward God when he claims that Bierce's philosophy is one of cosmic irony. "One of the concomitants of this discipline is the certainty that God is an enemy, not a friend, of man. He is a careless God."³⁵

Whether God is cruel or simply careless does not matter. The God of love and mercy has been destroyed, and His replacement is either actively against man or is simply unable to influence the universe in any positive way. Neither of these alternatives seems to be of any use to mankind. God may as well be dead. It appears that this latter idea also occurred to Bierce.

Bierce, it appears, was haunted from an early age by the possibility of the death of God. Carey McWilliams reports that Bierce had a recurring dream as a child in

which he traversed a dark and desolate land to a deserted building where he found a figure on a bed. Looking into the figure's face, he was disturbed to find the features were his own.³⁶ Bierce later described the dream in his poem "Finis Aeternitatis."

For man is ages dead in every zone;
The angels all are dead but I alone;
The devils, too, are cold enough at last,
And God lies dead before the great white throne!³⁷

The death of God and of the figure in this excerpt seems to indicate that as a youngster, Bierce was already entertaining nihilistic ideas about death. It is interesting to note that in the dreary place of the dream, mankind, too, is dead. The angel in the poem who is speaking, later says "And swear Eternity shall be no more."³⁸ It appears that Bierce was actively entertaining the idea that there is no life after death. Eternity itself has died in this poem and there is no promise of anything after its death. Essentially, the universe which man inhabits has disappeared into the void.

In this poem, Bierce seems to move quite close to the existential insistence on the death of God and the resultant nothingness. The tone of the poem is that of forlornness. Man, with the death of God, has been left with nothing. In "Existentialism is a Humanism," Sartre succinctly states man's position given the death of God. "When we speak of forlornness, a term Heidegger was fond of, we mean only that God does not exist and that we have to face all the consequences of this."³⁹ With the death of God, Edie says:

"man 'has got lost' and is now alone in the world. 'I have got lost; I am everything that has got lost, sighs modern man.'"⁴⁰ The theme of isolation is echoed in Bierce's war stories where the hero is, more often than not, alone. Bierce, as Eric Solomon says, "reproduces the serious minutiae of battle" and as an integral part of the scene, "the isolation of the individual who 'was alone...His world was a few square yards of wet and trampled earth about the feet of his horse.'"⁴¹ Bierce, in "Finis Aeternitatis," seems to have gotten lost in some netherworld that is filled with death, extinction of the universe and horrible dread.

The tone of dread and fear in the poem indicates Bierce has penetrated further into the world of the existentialist. Fear or dread is the beginning of the realization of the absurd for the existentialist. Nietzsche, Edie reports, thought that the discovery of the death of God was not "the basis for a new and consoling 'humanism.' It [was] a frightening experience which [was] just beginning."⁴² The essence of existential Angst, dread or anxiety, then, is fear. Edie explains further, "Dread is not the focused, explicit fear of something, but an uncanny, pervasive, subliminal fear of nothing, a fear that creeps up from behind."⁴³ It is interesting to note Edie's language in this excerpt in light of Bierce's tales of the uncanny where fear and death creep up from behind. A good example of this is Bierce's tale, "A Watcher By the Dead," where

the hero, Jarrette, is so frightened by nothing that he dies. Light has long been considered a symbol of God, and Jarrette's only light is that of a two-inch candle as he sits in lonely vigil by the dead body. Jarrette inspects the candle to see how long it will last. "It was barely two inches long; in another hour he would be in darkness. He replaced it in the candlestick and blew it out [my italics]."44 If the light can be considered a symbol of God, Mr. Jarrette has extinguished God, and is now surrounded by the darkness. Bierce says, "He may have thought, too, or half thought, that the darkness would be no worse at one time than another...."45 Fear overcomes Jarrette and he frantically scrabbles around on the floor for the candle. He finds it, relights it and finds he can disperse "the deeper shadows" with it. With the light, there is a lessening of the fear, but Jarrette extinguishes the candle again, and this time, he dies of fear. In reality, there is absolutely nothing in the room to frighten Jarrette, except the lack of light. In this story, Bierce has allowed his hero to experience nothingness. He has killed the light and has stepped into the void. And the overwhelming fear has catapulted him into a deeper void -- that of death. In the story, Bierce has approached and examined the existential Angst that is the fear of nothingness, or of a universe without God.

In a universe with a God, it is presumed that the God has a plan for whatever takes place in that universe. At least, the Judaic and Christian religions have operated on

that hypothesis for several thousand years. But in a universe where God is dead or irrational, it is likely that there is no plan. If there is no plan for the universe and no God to conduct affairs in the universe, then it follows that events in the universe are unplanned. In fact, one can hypothesize that such a universe is simply chaos, totally irrational and, very likely, absurd.

The universe of the existentialists is chaotic, irrational and absurd. God does not exist in the existential universe, and without God, man is left alone, isolated, to face chaos with no superhuman weapons. Nihilism is a philosophy that is based on the belief that the universe lacks a coherent meaning or direction since there is no God to act as director and provide meaning. Existentialism is a philosophy that is essentially nihilistic. The main difference between the nihilist and the existentialist is that the nihilist believes that man is blown by the winds of chance and has no power to affect the universe, much less triumph over the chaos. The existentialist believes that it is, indeed, possible not only to stand up to the universe, but, in certain circumstances, actually to triumph over the chaos.⁴⁶

Bierce has been called a nihilist, and certainly he seems nihilistic on the surface. Some time around 1922, Bertha Clark Pope's Victorian soul was shocked when she read Bierce's essay "To Train A Writer." She quoted a lengthy passage from the essay in her introduction to

The Letters of Ambrose Bierce:

"He should, for example, forget that he is an American and remember that he is a man. He should be neither Christian nor Jew, nor Buddhist, nor Mahometan, nor Snake Worshiper. To local standards of right and wrong he should be civilly indifferent. In the virtues, so-called, he should discern only the rough notes of a general expediency; in fixed moral principles only time-saving predecisions of cases not yet before the court of conscience. Happiness should disclose itself to his enlarging intelligence as the end and purpose of life; art and love as the only means to happiness. He should free himself of all doctrines, theories, etiquettes, politics, simplifying his life and mind, attaining clarity with breadth and unity with height. To him a continent should not seem wide nor a century long. And it would be needful that he know and have an ever-present consciousness that this is a world of fools and rogues, blind with superstition, tormented with envy, consumed with vanity, selfish, false, cruel, cursed with illusions -- frothing mad!"⁴⁷

Mrs. Pope commented:

Up to that last sentence Ambrose Bierce beholds this world as one where tolerance, breadth of view, simplicity of life and mind, clear thinking, are at most attainable, at least worthy of the effort to attain; he regards life as purposive, as having happiness for its end, and art and love as the means to that good end. But suddenly the string from which he has been evoking these broad harmonies snaps with a snarl. All is evil and hopeless -- "frothing mad." Both views cannot be held simultaneously by the same mind. Which was the real belief of Ambrose Bierce?⁴⁸

Mrs. Pope, probably for the wrong reasons, put her finger squarely on the problem that has been plaguing students of Bierce's philosophical stance for years. Was Bierce an optimist or a pessimist?

If this passage from "To Train A Writer" is taken as evidence, it seems that Bierce began an optimist, and ended a pessimist. In mid-paragraph, there was a radical change. But the tone of the paragraph allows us to see exactly where Bierce was heading. The paragraph, as

Mrs. Pope says, begins with a benign universe in which a reasonable man can exist, but suddenly, Bierce's rage breaks forth and he reveals what he really thinks of his world -- that it's frothing mad. In this passage, we see the essence of Bierce. He is indeed a nihilist, believing that the world is chaos, is frothing madness. He begins with what he wishes the universe could be, but ends by revealing what it really is. Bierce was a nihilist who retained a secret wish for an ordered universe. His orderly universe was only a daydream, an illusion, and the reality of a chaotic universe enraged him. Hence, the violent language at the end of the paragraph.

At this point, Bierce may have been in a state of existential rebellion. He was a nihilist in that he believed that the universe is chaotic, but he was an existentialist in his rage at such a situation. Hazel Barnes explains existential revolt like this:

...man's recognition that he stood alone in an irrational world without God was expressed in an attitude in which revolt and despair were equally mingled. Things ought not to be this way was the cry...

Camus explains further:

Rebellion is born of the spectacle of irrationality, confronted with an unjust and incomprehensible condition. But its blind impulse is to demand order in the midst of chaos, and unity in the very heart of the ephemeral.

The violent rage in the tone of the last sentence in Bierce's advice to young writers reflects Barnes' and Camus' scenario of the existential man in rebellion.

Revolt and despair seem to be mingled in Bierce's strangled cry that this is a world "cursed with illusions -- frothing mad!"

The baffled rage that Bierce expresses in his essay is rooted in resentment at the absurdity of man's position in a world of chaos. In The Rebel, Camus explains Scheler's ideas with regard to resentment. "Resentment is very well defined by Scheler as an autointoxication -- the evil secretion, in a sealed vessel, of prolonged impotence. ...resentment always turns into either unscrupulous ambition or bitterness..."⁵¹ Scheler's ideas are particularly important to an understanding of Bierce's philosophical position at the time of the writing of his essay "To Train A Writer." Bierce, as we have seen was enraged and resentful at a universe that was "frothing mad." The probable reason for this rage, according to Camus and Scheler, was Bierce's perception of man's impotence against such a universe. In discussing Bierce's war fiction, Eric Solomon mentions Bierce's resentment. "The keynote of Bierce's war fiction is frustration. His soldiers are chagrined by their limits of knowledge and their lack of control. Life is terrible and war is the epitome of its misery."⁵² H.L. Mencken also notes the lack of control that Bierce's soldiers exhibit in the chaotic world of war. "His war stories, even when they deal with the heroic, do not depict soldiers as heroes; they depict them as bewildered fools, doing things without sense, submitting to torture and outrage

without resistance, dying at last like hogs in Chicago..."⁵³

The chaos of war appears to be the perfect vehicle for Bierce to express his resentment and frustration at the irrational universe, and perhaps, that is why his war fiction is considered his best work.

It is interesting to note that Scheler says that one of the effects of resentment is bitterness. Bierce, of course, was known as "Bitter Bierce" because of his satirical newspaper columns which raged resentfully at the inanity of life in the Gilded Age. The frustration that marked his war stories also marked his newspaper columns, and it was a frustration that could only be rectified by taking the next step into existentialism.

"Sartre insists: 'Dieu n'existe pas,' and therefore man is his own master."⁵⁴ Since there is no plan for the universe or for man, man must live in complete freedom, choosing his own actions and values. To Sartre, "man's freedom is absolute. There is nothing which he does or is which is not the result of his own free choice; hence the unescapable corollary conclusion that he is responsible for each choice and the results thereof...."⁵⁵ Roubiczek says: "...human freedom is real. ...we have to start from freedom if we are to understand man."⁵⁶ In order to understand existential man, one must understand the concept of absolute freedom and the alternatives that exist within such a concept.

Sartre claims that "existence precedes essence" by which he means that "...first of all, man exists, turns up,

appears on the scene, and only afterwards, defines himself. If man, as the existentialist conceives him, is indefinable, it is because at first he is nothing. Only afterwards will he be something, and he himself will have made what he will be." ⁵⁷ So according to Sartre, every man defines himself by choosing between various alternatives. Mary Warnock says: "In the nothingness which lies at the heart of human beings there is an endless number of possibilities." ⁵⁸ It is the range of possibilities that creates existential anguish. Patricia Sanborn explains: "Anguish is the recognition of the full import of freedom. It is not fear of specific threats in the world. Rather it is apprehension following from the recognition of what freedom entails. A person can destroy his possibilities fully as much as he can create them." ⁵⁹

The reactions to anguish create the existential alternatives for man. "One reaction to anguish is flight, aimed at escaping the consciousness of freedom." ⁶⁰ This alternative is Sartre's "Bad Faith." "Bad Faith would not be possible except to a creature who was capable both of self-consciousness, in the minimal prereflective manner, and of negation; for it consists in seeing what one is, and denying it; asserting that one is what one is not." ⁶¹ Bad Faith, essentially, is lying to oneself or rationalizing. Good Faith is being honest with oneself. Bad Faith is a retreat into a mindless "everyday" existence. Sanborn explains Bad Faith, or to use Heidegger's term, inauthenticity, like this:

The inauthentic person refuses to see himself and his world clearly. Inauthenticity is manifested in the misuses of language, in bad faith, in the inability to recognize the role of the other, and in the rush of everyday activities. In a state of inauthenticity, one appropriates others; he does not try to understand them. Curiosity and distraction predominate. Inauthentic behavior is a form of uprootedness. The inauthentic person is not at home; he has fallen out of being. Falling leads to temptation, tranquilizing, alienation, and self-entangling -- a downward plunge into the groundlessness of inauthentic everydayness.⁶²

The authentic person, on the other hand: "...comes to grips with his freedom and takes responsibility for his projects."⁶³

To simplify matters, we can say that the inauthentic person who is living in Bad Faith retreats into unthinking everydayness and abrogates responsibility for his choices in order to avoid the anguish of facing himself as a totally free man. Good Faith then is the opposite; the existential man faces his freedom and accepts responsibility for the choices he makes. These are the first two alternatives for existential man. He can live either in Bad Faith, denying his freedom, or he can live in Good Faith, taking responsibility for his choices.

There is also a third alternative for man caught in the horror of existential anguish, and that choice is suicide. Frederick Karl and Leo Hammalian explain the situation:

God dead, all lines of authority without validity, the idols of the past in their twilight or already dimmed, atheistic Existential man has nowhere to turn but to his own resources. He must redefine himself and, in the agonizing process, redefine time, space, place, aims, final things. He may turn nowhere but inward; his own being will be the measure of all things. Everything

beyond exists neutrally, and it exists indifferently, without regard to him. It is he who must impress himself upon its indeterminate, non-causal, unpatterned character. He is pattern, or he is nothing. Suicide tempts, or overcomes.⁶⁴

Camus claims: "There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy."⁶⁵

But most existentialists eventually decide against suicide as a true alternative because the act of committing suicide is likely to be in Bad Faith. Camus explains this conclusion most completely:

The final conclusion of absurdist reasoning is, in fact, the repudiation of suicide and the acceptance of the desperate encounter between human inquiry and the silence of the universe. Suicide would mean the end of this encounter, and absurdist reasoning considers that it could not consent to this without negating its own premises. According to absurdist reasoning, such a solution would be the equivalent of flight or deliverance.⁶⁶

The problem of suicide is important to any student of Ambrose Bierce's work. Bierce was, ostensibly, a believer in suicide. In his essay, "The Right to Take Oneself Off," he defends the right to suicide. He compares the relationship between God and man as that of the dealer and players in a poker game, and he advises the players that "The time to quit is when you have lost a big stake, your fool hope of eventual success, your fortitude and your love of the game."⁶⁷ He goes on to say that those who choose to live are cowardly, and the suicides are courageous:

Suicide is always courageous. We call it courage in

a soldier merely to face death -- say to lead a forlorn hope -- although he has a chance of life and a certainty of "glory." But the suicide does more than face death; he incurs it, and with a certainty, not of glory, but of reproach.⁶⁸ If that is not courage we must reform our vocabulary.

It seems that Bierce was foursquare in favor of suicide, but in the same essay, he contradicted himself, saying of the man who commits suicide:

To one who does not regard himself as the center of creation and his sorrow as the throes of the universe, life, if not worth living, is also not worth leaving. The ancient philosopher who was asked why he did not die if, as he taught, life was no better than death, replied: "Because death is no better than life." We do not know that either proposition is true, but the matter is not worth bothering about, for both states are supportable -- life despite its pleasures and death despite its repose.⁶⁹

Also, after his paragraph on the courageousness of suicide, he says:

True, there may be a higher courage in living than in dying -- a moral courage greater than physical.⁷⁰

Bierce seems to be ambivalent about suicide, and in the long run, to express the same attitude toward taking one's own life as the existentialists which is that suicide is an alternative, but it may very well be the more honorable way to choose life in the face of "the man who keeps the table."⁷¹

With regard to the first two alternatives of the existentialists, that of living in Bad Faith or that of facing up to the irrational, absurd universe, one can fairly safely say that Bierce never lived in Bad Faith. He never buried himself in "everydayness." Instead, he considered the philosophic problems that occurred to him, and in story

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after story, examined the causes and alternatives of these problems.

Though Bierce never openly said that he believed that man lives in existential freedom and must make choices or that man also has the responsibility for his choices, he did make rather hesitant stabs at the problem in his war stories. His biographers all agree that the Civil War years were the most important years, philosophically, to Bierce, and that he never really came to grips with the problem that war presented to him. It is possible that the problem Mary Warnock discusses in explaining Sartre's conception of values is somewhat the same as Bierce's problem with war.

Values, Sartre says 'spring up around us like partridges' when we take a step in any direction. But every now and then, perhaps because of some war or revolution, perhaps because of some personal crisis, people are forced to think about their values, and it will be then that they face their freedom in anguish. They will find themselves bereft of all the ordinary ways of thought, of all the comforting beliefs...

Warnock says that a crisis like a war may bring people face to face with the reality that their cherished rules and beliefs cannot stand under such extreme stress, and that the are alone and free to make their own rules.

Bierce says almost the same thing in a Prattle column, published on Sunday, May 9, 1897:

Time was, in that far fair world of youth where I went a-soldiering for Freedom, when the moral character of every thought and word and deed was determined by reference to a set of infinitely precious "principles" -- infallible criteria -- moral solvents, mordant to all base metals, and warranted by the manufacturers and vendors to disclose the fold in every proposition submitted to the test. Alas, I have no longer the

advantage of their service, but must judge
on its own merits -- each case as it comes up.⁷³

In this excerpt, Bierce admits that as a youth, marching off to war, he was a believer in society's rules and beliefs, but sometime during the war, he intimates, he lost that comfortable belief and became a skeptic, choosing to make his own judgments. In short, he found himself forced to make his own rules.

Sometime during the war, Bierce became a proto-existentialist. It is quite likely that something happened to him at Shiloh because most of his biographers seem to think that Shiloh, General Grant's Dunkirk, was the turning point in Bierce's life, though Stuart Woodruff believes it may have been Chickamauga where "in the enchanted forest, he 'lost something' that he never recovered although he went back over the same ground many times to find it."⁷⁴

In his essay "What I Saw of Shiloh," Bierce recaptures the horror and glory of the scene, and in the process possibly reveals the roots of his later proto-existentialism. He describes the scene of battle in harrowing detail, including a graphic description of a wounded man whose "brain protruded in bosses, dropping off in flakes and strings."⁷⁵ Bierce's brigade was pinned down by artillery fire, and it is during this barrage that he rages against his impotence in the face of such impersonal death. "What would we not have given to join them [the other men in the battle] in their brave, hopeless task! But to lie inglorious

beneath showers of shrapnel darting divergent from the unassailable sky -- meekly to be blown out of life by level gusts of grape -- to clench our teeth and shrink helpless before big shot pushing noisily through the consenting air -- this was horrible!"⁷⁶ In the last section of the article, Bierce reminisces about his youth as a soldier, saying: "Unfamiliar landscapes, glittering with sunshine or sullen with rain, come to me demanding recognition, pass, vanish and give place to others. Here in the night stretches a wide and blasted field studded with half-extinct fires burning redly with I know not what presage of evil. Again I shudder as I note its desolation and its awful silence. Where was it? To what monstrous inharmony of death was it the visible prelude?"⁷⁷

Bierce sounds like an existentialist wondering about the irrational universe in this excerpt, and in fact, that is almost what he is. War is chaos where man either lives or dies. War is chaos where man is dehumanized, turned into a fighting machine, with no thought to his desires or wishes. Yet war is a chaos where the individual's own choices -- whether he attacks and risks death or whether he runs and risks ignominy, whether he raises his head and risks being killed or whether he opts for momentary safety behind a rotten log -- makes the difference to the whole rest of his life.

Perhaps at Shiloh Bierce faced a moment of truth when the illusions of his youth fell from him and left him alone in harsh reality, recognizing the necessity to make his own choices in life. Certainly, his awareness of such a moment is exhibited over and over again in his war stories.

One of the hallmarks of Bierce's war stories is that the action occurs within a very short period of time. As Bertha Clark Pope says: "Bierce's interest does not lie in the group experience nor even in the experience of the individual through a long period. His unit of time is the minute, not the month." ⁷⁸ David Weimer echoes her: "What the characters undergo -- and what matters to Bierce -- is an instant, always brightly attractive in its brief duration, of intensely felt or intensely perceived experience. The grotesquely unstable, fragile, precarious nature of the individual's rare and therefore valuable experience is precisely Bierce's theme."⁷⁹

The instant that interests Bierce has been called "the existential moment" by M.E. Grenander because it is the very time that the illusion of reason falls away from man, and he is faced with the full force of the absurd.

Grenander explains Bierce's recurrent existential moment this way:

Bierce had learned that man stands poised precariously on the abyss of anguish, despair, and death. Most critical human actions are motivated at those junctures when the soul is stripped naked and for better or worse, stands alone. These crucial moments in a man's -- or a woman's -- life are those which not only indicate

the pattern of his personality, but reveal his character.

Thus even the man who is able to strike through the mask to the reality beyond finds himself, in a moment of crisis, faced with the ultimate existential anxiety. As a living, sentient organism he must act, with such awareness and such understanding as he can muster of forces that are frequently dark and mysterious. Involved are not only his own being, but also history, human nature, and finally, the universe itself. How he will act -- or react -- at such moments is a terrifying self-revelation, for in the last analysis it is himself alone on whom he must rely. His best is often not good enough, and he may plunge into the abyss. The solitary confrontation, however, with the desert places of nature, the cosmos, and his inner being he cannot avoid. When he faces it, he may not recover. But during that stark agony, as at no other time, he discovers who he is, what life is, what it means to be. If he lives at all after that -- and he may not -- he will, like Young Goodman Brown, never again be the same.⁸⁰

Bierce examines the problem of the existential moment over and over in his war stories. Some of his existential heroes commit suicide while others choose to live in chaos, despite their knowledge of the true state of things in the universe. It almost seems as if Bierce were working out his own philosophical dilemma through his heroes. If at Shiloh, he faced the absurdity of nothingness, what did he resolve? He continued living; does that make him an existential optimist? But he defended suicide; does that make him an existential pessimist?

If the war stories are taken as evidence, it appears that Bierce remained ambivalent about exactly how to resolve the question posed by the existential moment. He spent his life trying to answer Camus' question: "...how far is one to go to elude nothing? Is one to die voluntarily or to hope in spite of everything?"⁸¹

SECTION II

Pessimistic Existentialism in "The Mockingbird"
and
Optimistic Existentialism in "A Son of the Gods"

The essence of the existential moment in Bierce's war fiction is that it is the moment when the lack of unified order in the universe becomes clear to the hero, and when he recognizes the existence of chaos and his own cosmic insignificance amidst chaos. Camus calls it "a privileged and bitter moment in which hope has no further place...."⁸² The existential moment is the time of decision when man has to choose between the alternatives of death or life. Man can retreat into "everydayness," but that is not Bierce's way. Instead, he allows his heroes to choose between the other two existential alternatives -- suicide or life which is responsible, valid, or in "Good Faith."

The choices his heroes make define them as either existential pessimists or existential optimists. Suicide is seen by most existentialists as failure, or as Camus says: "Suicide is a repudiation."⁸³ The existential alternative of a life lived in the face of chaos and nothingness is not, however, a true alternative for Bierce in his war stories. Instead, Bierce chooses life through heroic death. The existential moment he sees is one in which, as Von Rintelen says, the "full instant of fulfilled, timeless time is...supposed somehow to leave behind the nothingness of what-is-there and to raise us into the sphere of boundlessness."⁸⁴ This view of death is essentially Romantic, in which the "human being who is condemned to death is, at least, magnificent before he disappears, and his

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magnificence is his justification."⁸⁵ But it is also prototypically existential. Stuart Woodruff recognized this type of existential suicide in Bierce's work:

With the paradoxical irony some modern existentialists are so fond of, Bierce regarded self-destruction as a kind of creative act, a weird moral achievement in a universe virtually drained of moral purpose and meaning. It was as if the individual could only assert his will by relinquishing it altogether in a final destructive act. Suicide became a last salute⁸⁶ to all those dark forces conspiring against man....

Bierce saw suicide as both bitter failure and transcendent success, a dichotomy which marked his ambivalence toward the possibilities of existence within the existential, or nihilistic, universe of irrational chaos. This ambivalence is most evident in two of his war stories, "The Mocking-bird," a story of pessimistic suicide, and "A Son of the Gods," a story of optimistic suicide.

In "The Mocking-bird" Private William Grayrock, whose "character is a singularly felicitous compound of boldness and sensibility, courage and conscience" is on his first sentry duty when he hears a twig snap and fires at the sound. Private Grayrock was lost in the forest at the time of the fatal shot which, when heard by his compatriots, resulted in a hasty retreat, a scenario not unusual in men unaccustomed to war. Grayrock, being lost, doesn't know in which direction to retreat so he remains at his post, thus earning a commendation for his bravery and sensibility. Grayrock cannot rest though until he finds the body of the Confederate soldier whom he is confident he has shot. Actually,

he secretly hopes he has missed, but as an expert marksman, chances are that he has succeeded in killing the man. He goes back into the "enchanted forest" and falls asleep, dreaming of his boyhood before he and his twin brother were separated. William, our protagonist, went to live in the north, "the Realm of Conjecture," and his brother, John, went to live in the south, "the Enchanted Land." A leit-motif of a trilling mockingbird sounds throughout the dream. Upon awakening, Grayrock sees a mockingbird, and he weeps for the past and for his present loneliness. The bird flies away and Grayrock looks into the thicket where it sang only to discover the body of his brother. "He had found his man," says Bierce. Grayrock is overcome by grief and guilt at this discovery and commits suicide.

The pattern of "The Mocking-bird" is typically Biercean. Woodruff describes "the familiar pattern of Bierce's war fiction as a whole: the forest setting, the initiatory experience, the young brave hero undone by circumstances and his own frailty, the final twist of irony."⁸⁷ Though the pattern is typical of Bierce's war stories, "The Mocking-bird" is more completely and pessimistically proto-existential than most of the other stories.

The first lines of the story support Woodruff's scenario. "The time, a pleasant Sunday afternoon in the early autumn of 1861. The place, a forest's heart in the mountain region of southwestern Virginia."⁸⁸ The action takes place in a forest, and Private Grayrock, the young

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brave hero, is about to be undone. But as Grayrock lazily reclines against a tree, resting in the pleasant sunlight, "a wall of shadow" obscures the "golden haze" and the light blends into an "indistinguishable blue (MB, p. 104)." The warm sunlight fades, leaving Grayrock alone in the darkness where he will face the existential moment. He will have to face an irrational universe where coincidence can condemn and idealistic illusion must die.

The existential moment may be defined as the clash between chaos and unity, between rationality and irrationality or between illusion and reality. The existential moment represents a sort of schizophrenia of the soul for Grayrock because he must face not only the loss of his idealistic illusions and look into the reality of chaos, but he must make a choice between life and death amidst such chaos.

Grayrock is a typically Biercean hero, an idealistic youth who has a good opinion of his own abilities. While on guard duty, he gets lost in the forest and his confusion and fear lead to his confrontation with the existential moment.

The forest acts as an image in this story. When Grayrock fires the shot, it is night, and he is on guard duty in the heart of the forest. The wood is gloomy and the "darkness" is "deep." He is "leaning against the trunk of a large tree, staring into the darkness in his front and trying to recognize known objects.... But all was now different;

he saw nothing in detail, but only groups of things, whose shapes, not observed when there was something more of them to observe, were now unfamiliar. They seemed not to have been there before. A landscape that is all trees and undergrowth, moreover, lacks definition, is confused and without accentuated points upon which attention can gain a foothold (MB, p. 100)." The landscape has become eerily indistinct, a place where Grayrock is isolated amidst dimly perceived shapes that exude subtle menace.

Grayrock's situation with regard to nature can be compared with Albert Camus' description of the perception of nature by existential man:

A step lower and strangeness creeps in: perceiving that the world is "dense," sensing to what a degree a stone is foreign and irreducible to us, with what intensity nature or a landscape can negate us. At the heart of all beauty lies something inhuman, and these hills, the softness of the sky, the outline of these trees at this very minute lose the illusory meaning with which we had clothed them, henceforth more remote than a lost paradise. The primitive hostility of the world rises up to face us across millenia.⁸⁹

Nature, in the form of the forest, symbolizes dimly discernible chaos for Grayrock. One cannot trust his own reason or his senses in such a forest, and so Grayrock gets lost.

Grayrock fires the fatal shot, initiating the circumstances of his own defeat. Bierce often allows his heroes to make some sort of show in the face of the universe, but it is always skewed by the chaotic cosmos into final defeat for the hero. In this case, the shot is the mechanism that

brings Grayrock into confrontation with the nature of existence in the existential moment.

Grayrock's dream takes him back to his youth. For Bierce, youth is "the Enchanted Forest." It is a time of magical illusion, "The Period of Possibility" as Bierce defines it in The Devil's Dictionary, before realization of the true nature of the universe and disillusion set in. The dream has a fairy tale setting which indicates the idealistic illusion of youth. Grayrock and his brother, John, who were twins, live once again in a "far, fair land" where they "walked in paths of light through valleys of peace, seeing new things under a new sun (MB, p. 103)." Their peaceful bliss, however, ends when the brothers are split up on the death of their mother. Grayrock goes to live in the "Realm of Conjecture" while his brother takes their pet mockingbird and goes to live in "the Enchanted Land."

The problem of the meaning of the terms for the two boys' homes arises at this point. Woodruff believes that the names signify the split between the dream state and reality. "William's home suggests both the actual world of the immediate present and William's tendency to theorize about life, to draw conclusions from its uncertain premises. John's mysterious "Enchanted Land" is a nonexistent dream-state, a "distant region," to which William returns momentarily when he becomes a child "in spirit and in memory."⁹⁰

It seems to me that it is more likely, in view of the political events preceding the Civil War, that William's

"Realm of Conjecture" at least in part represents the ignorance of people in the North about their Southern relatives, and their curiosity about them. The "Enchanted Land" of the South where "strange and wicked" people live seems to support this thought, and if so, the two lands represent the national Angst of the pre-Civil War period when distrust between the two sections of the country predominated. The image of the river running between the two lands seems to reinforce this thought because the two boys lived on the river before being parted. They existed directly on the seam that separates the two regions, and with this in mind, they may represent the "glue" that once held the two hostile sections together during the idyllic days of the nation's youth. The fact that the twins, representing the common metaphor of one being, are separated and eventually end up fighting for opposing sides in the Civil War seems to underscore the image once again. There is a pervading schizophrenia in the dream, not only on the personal level, but on the national level. The madness of schizophrenia has induced the existential moment not only for Grayrock, but the nation as a whole. Grayrock's destruction of his brother is a microcosmic example of the Angst that has thrown a nation into chaos, and has resulted in the moment of choice between life and death for both Grayrock and for the country as a whole. It is the moment of existential maturity for Grayrock and for his country.

The fact that Bierce examined this metaphor in a dream

is interesting in light of existentialism. Camus also uses a sleep metaphor to explain the existential awakening:

Weariness comes at the end of the acts of a mechanical life, but at the same time it inaugurates the impulse of consciousness. It awakens consciousness and provokes what follows. What follows is the gradual return into the chain or it is the definitive awakening. At the end of the awakening comes, in time, the consequence: suicide or recovery.⁹¹

Both Grayrock and the nation have succumbed to a sort of weariness of the soul. Both have allowed themselves to be split apart, and the awakening from this somnolence results in the existential choice -- suicide or life. The nation attempts suicide, but recovers. Grayrock attempts suicide and succeeds.

The image of the mockingbird permeates the dream, and upon awakening, Grayrock finds that there is, in fact, a mockingbird trilling in the forest. Woodruff thinks that the mockingbird, symbolically, is a "false prophet of promise."⁹² The song of the mockingbird does seem to represent the happiness of William's youth, but the idea of the mockingbird representing promise seems rather farfetched considering William's situation at the time he hears the bird. There is an alternate explanation which seems to fit the image better.

In the South, there is an understanding among hunters, from the time they are given their first guns, that one should never kill a mockingbird. The reason for this was explained by Harper Lee in her novel To Kill A Mockingbird. Miss Maudie Atkinson explains to Scout:

Mockingbirds don't do one thing but make music for us to enjoy. They don't eat up people's gardens, don't nest in corncribs, they don't do one thing but sing their hearts out for us. That's why it's a sin to kill a mockingbird.

Harper Lee's mockingbird represents all that is beautiful and gentle in the world, and it is quite possible that Bierce's mockingbird symbolizes the same thing. The mockingbird was a constant companion to William and John in their youth when life was golden, and beauty and love were possible. Of the mockingbird's song, Bierce says: "That fresh, clear melody seemed, indeed, the spirit of the scene, the meaning and interpretation to the sense of the mysteries of life and love (MB, p. 103)."

When Grayrock finds his brother's body, the scene is described thus:

...there, supine upon the earth, its arms all abroad, its gray uniform stained with a single spot of blood upon the breast, its white face turned sharply upward and backward, lay the image of himself! -- the body of John Grayrock, dead of a gunshot wound, and still warm! (MB, p. 104)

The image of a dead mockingbird is overwhelming in this passage. Mockingbirds are gray with white heads. John is dressed in gray and his face is white. A dead bird's head, if the bird is lying on its back, is usually "turned sharply upward and backward" just as John's head is positioned. Grayrock has not only killed his twin brother, but he has killed the mockingbird -- the source of beauty and gentleness in the world.

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To underscore this image, Bierce than adds that "the shrilling bird upon the bough overhead stilled her song and, flushed with sunset's crimson glory, glided silently away through the solemn spaces of the wood (MB, p. 104)." The mockingbird, symbol of the benign world, has flown away, just as Grayrock's once gentle world has become horrible, and he must face the ultimate test of the individual -- the existential moment when good has flown away and the world is engulfed in horror.

Coincidence has brought the two brothers together and the meeting has resulted in death. Arthur E. Miller says that coincidence is "of paramount importance in Bierce's work. "Once, in a story, he explained: 'we do not know the inexorable law underlying coincidences.' Almost all of his tales depend on it in some way."⁹⁴ In a universe of chaos, the probability of any event happening is one. Therefore anything can happen in such a universe, and coincidence or chance is the norm. Bierce's heavy reliance on chance in his stories merely reinforces the idea that he did, indeed, believe that the universe is a place of chaos where isolated man must face the irrationality of his world and decide how he can best approach it -- suicide or life. Coincidence has condemned Grayrock to face this existential choice.

When Grayrock finds his brother in the thicket, he experiences the full force of existential anguish, which results in his suicide. Grayrock's dream has been destroyed

and along with it has gone his idealistic illusion of an orderly and rational universe. "Once such illusions have been systematically exposed, what remains is the paralyzing horror at the heart of things -- the terrible emptiness of life itself."⁹⁵ Grayrock can't face such emptiness, and so he kills himself. In so doing, he has admitted total failure in the face of the universe. Grayrock has experienced the existential moment, and he has chosen death over life.

In killing himself, Grayrock has subscribed to Kafka's epigram: "In the fight between you and the world, back the world."⁹⁶ Grayrock has allowed the senseless universe to destroy him, and in so doing has negated any possible meaning for his existence. This is the nadir of pessimistic existentialism. It is complete nihilism, reminiscent of the nihilism of Sartre who, as Paul Roubiczek points out, was forced by his own logic to say: "All existing beings are born for no reason, continue through weakness and die by accident...Man is a useless passion."⁹⁷ In choosing death over life when he is faced with the existential moment, Grayrock has denied himself the possibility of any value in his life. His impulsive suicide is utterly pointless as a gesture of defiance in the face of the irrational universe because there are no witnesses to know why he has done it. There is no moral involved. Grayrock has achieved absolutely nothing by killing himself, except that, of course, he is dead and free of the chaos. Grayrock's death is not a "moral achievement" as Woodruff claims, but

simply a release. Grayrock, in committing suicide, is merely being selfish.

Yet, the kindly Camus can find some meaning even in so meaningless a suicide as Grayrock's. Perhaps, Camus suggests, Grayrock has created a sort of value in his suicide.

If the world is a matter of indifference to the man who commits suicide, it is because he has an idea of something that is not or could not be indifferent to him. He believes that he is destroying everything or taking everything with him; but from this act of self-destruction itself a value arises which, perhaps, might have made it worthwhile to live. Absolute negation therefore is not consummated by suicide. 98

The point of Camus' thought is that though the suicide does kill himself, it is because he has an inkling of something that is important. This something gives value to the act, and therefore, the man who commits suicide in an attempt to achieve absolute negation fails because there is value in the something he suspected before the deed was accomplished.

Nevertheless, Grayrock's "something" is his recognition that the cosmos is unfair -- that the universe doesn't play by the rules. Rules are manmade though, and the universe is under no compulsion to abide by them. The universe is morally lawless and cannot recognize manmade rules.

Grayrock's complaint against the cosmos is, therefore, groundless, and once again, his suicide loses its meaning.

Coincidence has condemned Grayrock because chance brought his brother to that particular forest on that particular night to stop that particular bullet. Were his vision of the irrational universe less apocalyptic, one might say that Grayrock committed suicide in a fit of childish

petulance, but that would be unfair to him. When the full force of the irrational universe is nakedly revealed to Grayrock, his reaction is that of the pessimist. He sees no possible recourse for puny mankind in the face of such overwhelming odds. "The man who keeps the table" has beaten Grayrock, and Grayrock, like Kafka, decides that in the battle between himself and the irrational world, he'll "back the world."

"The Mocking-bird" shows Bierce at his most pessimistic. He allows his hero, Grayrock, to experience the existential moment of full realization of the true nature of the universe when his illusions are lost and existential Angst overcomes him, but Bierce fails to allow Grayrock to provide any real value for others who have stood on the edge of the abyss. In this particular story, Bierce's message to those who are looking into the void appears to be, "Jump! It's the only thing you can do." This viewpoint is utterly pessimistic within the context of existentialism. However, within the same context, there does exist an alternative to suicide in despair. Not only Camus, but Sartre himself, offered a possible way to avoid the meaningless of Grayrock's death. There is a way to achieve a "finite transcendence" in the face of the irrational cosmos, and in another story, "A Son of the Gods," Bierce examined this alternative.

Freidrich Nietzsche was one of the first existential thinkers to approach the problem of how man can give meaning to a meaningless existence. God, for Nietzsche, was dead,

and with no God, there can be no externally imposed unity in the universe. Chaos, then, must reign in this particular cosmos, and chaos allows no prefabricated meaning to the life of anyone who lives within such an irrational universe. Nietzsche chose a rather simple way to overcome the difficulty of meaninglessness for mankind. He argued that if God is dead, then man must become a god. Man must transcend the chaos to establish the godhead within himself, and from this logic sprang Nietzsche's idea of the Superman. Essentially, Nietzsche meant to create a new human race because mankind, as he saw it, "does not improve, it does not even exist -- it is an abstraction; all that exists is a vast ant-hill of individuals."⁹⁹ Only certain people among mankind could conceive of the Superman, and it was those isolated men whom Nietzsche admired most. Zarathustra says: "I love those who do not know how to live except in perishing, for they are those going beyond."¹⁰⁰ In Zarathustra's statement, Nietzsche prefigures the existential hero. He is the man who gives value to life because he is the one who recognizes the need for the Superman and is willing to perish for progress toward this goal.

Nietzsche's vision of the Superman implied a belief in progress which later existentialists could not support. In a chaotic universe, progress seems to be out of place. If the universe is chaos, how far can man progress? And, in which direction should he proceed? To the existentialists, the very idea of progress in chaos is absurd. Instead of

following Nietzsche's map for the ultimate progression of mankind into Supermen, the later existentialists attempted to find a new way for man to give meaning to finite existence. The solution offered by Sartre and Camus contains Nietzsche's necessity for transcendence, but man cannot, in their view, transcend himself to the point of becoming a god. Instead, "transcendence is in, not above the world."¹⁰¹ Existential man must impose his own value or meaning upon the world. He must create a pattern in the chaos of the universe. Hazel Barnes quotes Sartre to explain:

To say that we invent values means nothing except this: life has no meaning a priori. Before you live it, life is nothing, but it is for you to give it a meaning. Value is ¹⁰²nothing other than this meaning which you choose.

Barnes simplifies Sartre's ideas, explaining further:

Let us imagine reality to have the shape of a gigantic Chinese checkerboard -- without even the logically arranged spacing of the regularly shaped holes as in the usual game board, and with various-sized marbles, only some of which will fit into the spaces provided. The traditional attitude of religion and philosophy has been that we faced two alternatives. Theological and rational positions have assumed that there exists some correct pattern, impressed into the board itself, which can be discovered and which will then show us how we may satisfactorily and correctly arrange the piles of marbles near us. They have assumed -- and so have the Nihilists -- that if there is no such motive for making a particular pattern, then there is no reason to play at all. If there is no motive for making a particular pattern, they have concluded that one might as well destroy the patterns set up by others or commit suicide. Existentialism holds that there is a third possibility. There is no pre-existing pattern. No amount of delving into the structure of the board will reveal one inscribed there in matter. Nor is it sensible to hope for some nonmaterial force which might magnetically draw the marbles into their correct position if we put ourselves in touch with such a power by prayer or drugs or any other device

which man might think of. But while this lack deprives man of guide and certain goal, it leaves him free to create his own pattern. It is true that there is no external model according to which one may pronounce the new pattern good or bad, better or worse. There are only the individual judgments by him who makes it and by those who behold it, and these need not agree. If the maker finds value in his own creation, if the process of making is satisfying, if the end result compares sufficiently favorably with the intention, then the pattern has value and the individual life has been worthwhile. ¹⁰³

But Barnes' explanation fails to explain how a person's pattern creates value for anyone but himself. While the creation of individual meaning for one's life is better than living with no meaning at all, it seems that meaning, in order to be transcendent, must be communicated to others. Sartre knew this, and an important corollary to the methods of imposing value upon one's life is that "we exist, essentially, in relation to other people."¹⁰⁴

With regard to the imposition of patterns on one's life, Barnes explains Sartre's thoughts about the relationship to other people like this:

...no such pattern exists alone. Although its unique form and color remain distinctly perceptible, it is intermeshed with the edges of the patterns of others -- like the design of a paisley print. The satisfaction in a life may well result in large part from the sense that these intermeshings have positive significance for the individual pattern. There is another kind of satisfaction -- that which comes from the knowledge that other persons have declared one's pattern good. Still a third derives from the realization that what one has done has helped make it easier for others to live patterns intrinsically satisfying to them.¹⁰⁵

This is Sartre's answer to Nietzsche's insistence that man must become a god. Sartre says that man does not have

to become a god to give meaning to life in a chaotic cosmos. Instead, man must merely create a pattern for his life, and the value of that pattern will be decided not only by the individual man, but by others whose own patterns may be influenced by his choices. Those men who have the courage to make such choices can be considered transcendent in an existential world.

In "A Son of the Gods," Ambrose Bierce begins with Nietzsche and ends with Sartre, and along the way, exhibits Camus' theory of existential heroism.

"A Son of the Gods" begins with the Northern troops facing a stretch of open country through which they must pass. There is the possibility that the Confederate troops are massed on the other side of a ridge which is topped by a stone fence. The Northern general and his troops cannot see the Southerners and do not know whether they are actually there or not. The standard maneuver is to send a skirmish line out into the open with the knowledge that if the Southerners are there, the skirmish line will be decimated. As the general ponders the problem, a young officer offers to ride into the open and ascertain the position of the opposing army. The general allows him to take the risk, and the young man, dressed in full dress uniform and riding a white horse with a red saddle blanket, canters into the open area.

The scene is reported by an unnamed narrator who is an officer among the Northern troops. He and the rest of

the forward troops watch in amazement as the young officer exposes himself to possible enemy fire. The officer rides directly up to a gap in the fence and sees the enemy on the other side. He then rides up and down in front of them, trying to get them to shoot at him and thus reveal their position. Essentially, he is committing heroic suicide. The narrator becomes emotionally involved with the officer's plight, reflecting the emotions felt by all the troops, and when the officer is finally shot down, the troops, without orders, charge the ridge in a frenzy of emotional reaction to the hero's fall. As they rush forward into battle, they hear the general's bugler sound retreat! The heroism of the young officer and the answering heroism among the ranks has all gone for naught. The narrator bitterly cries, "Ah, those many, many needless dead! That great soul whose beautiful body is lying over yonder, so conspicuous against the serene hillside -- could it not have been spared the bitter consciousness of a vain devotion? Would one exception have marred too much the pitiless perfection of the divine, eternal plan? (SG, p. 29)"

The final anguished cry of the narrator would, on the surface, seem to make this a story of nihilistic failure, and therefore, it would seem that this is a pessimistic story. But if one considers the existentialist definition of success as the fact that an individual has impressed, if even for only a brief moment, a pattern on the universe, one can see that this is really a story of existential optimism.

"A Son of the Gods" begins with a stage setting like the beginning of "The Mocking-bird." "A breezy day and a sunny landscape. An open country to right and left and forward; behind, a wood (SG, p. 24)." Bierce often "sets the stage" in this way, using few words to establish the scene. In setting the stage in this manner, Bierce very adroitly informs the reader that a drama is about to take place, and then he produces the play.

In setting the scene for this particular drama, Bierce has divided the characters into those behind the lines and those who compose the front lines. The men behind the lines are within the forest and their presence is described like this: "The wood is alive with them, and full of confused noises -- the occasional rattle of wheels as a battery or artillery goes into position to cover the advance; the hum and murmur of the soldiers talking; a sound of innumerable feet in the dry leaves... (SG, p. 24)." Bierce seems to be comparing the soldiers with insects in this passage. Later, he says of the men: "...the populous depths of the forest still murmur with their unseen and unseeing swarm... (SG, p. 26)." Once again, the behind-the-lines troops are compared to insects. Mankind has been dehumanized in this passage, a device which Eric Solomon sees as a metaphor for the chaos of war:

Man is dehumanized, referred to either in terms of animals or machines. Bierce is ... disturbed by the absurdity of war which, after all, reverses the natural processes. It is against natural law to die young, and Bierce registers his complaint by reversing his imagery,

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turning men into beasts (as war does) and endowing
the instruments of death with human attributes. 106

Bierce uses the image of man as animal and the image of machine as man in many of his stories, but in "A Son of the Gods," Bierce's comparison of soldiers with insects is reminiscent of Nietzsche's comparison of mankind with ants. Both Bierce and Nietzsche see mankind as insects chaotically swarming over the earth, and insectlike mankind is seen as having as little value to the universe as an anthill has to mankind.

The progress of Bierce's blue-coated human swarm has been checked by open country. If the men move forward, they may very well step into the abyss, into the arms of death. What is needed are a few supermen who are willing to step into the abyss for the sake of others, and the troops confidently await the arrival of the chosen few who will form the skirmish line. Instead, they get only one superman -- the dashing young officer. He is the beloved of Zarathustra because he is the one who is willing to perish in order to promote progress.

The transcendental nature of the young officer is made clear by Bierce through an allegorical comparison between the officer and Christ. When the young officer first appears, he is met by laughter. "A wave of derisive laughter runs abreast of him all along the line (SG, p. 25)." But when he rides directly toward the crest of the hill, the narrator cries, "How glorious! Gods! what would we not give to be in his place -- with his soul! O, if he would but turn --

if he could but see the love, the adoration, the atonement! (SG, p. 26)" The religious overtones in the last speech indicate the swelling of ecstatic emotion at the sight of the glorious figure alone on the hill. The narrator continues his comparison of the officer with Christ, particularly when he says that the officer has saved the line of skirmishers from almost certain annihilation by his heroic sacrifice. "Let me pay all," says this gallant man -- this military Christ! (SG, p. 27)" The comparison between the hero and Christ brings the story to an unbearable emotional pitch, and the hero's final gesture of brandishing his sword in a salute to his troops seems an anticlimax after the emotional heights of his ride up the hill. The final irony of the worthlessness of the deed loses some of its strength due to this gradual lessening of emotional tensions.

Nevertheless, by equating the officer with Christ, Bierce has elevated him to godhood. In the midst of the chaos of war, the young officer has transcended common humanity, and has become a god. Bierce seems to have agreed with Nietzsche that in the absence of God, men must become gods. Like Christ, the young officer has sacrificed himself to promote the progress of mankind, and has thereby become a god himself.

A new question then arises. Toward what is this army of mankind progressing? Why exactly has there been the necessity for the young officer to sacrifice himself? The

answer, it seems, is that the progress is toward death in the form of another battle. Rather than progressing toward Nietzsche's goal of a sort of super-humanity, Bierce's soldiers are only progressing further into chaos, toward death. Therefore, the young officer's heroism fails to give any value to mankind in a Nietzschean sense because his heroism is finite. He is no Superman. Yet he is "A Son of the Gods" because he has transcended finitude by giving another kind of value to mankind. His reckless courage has made man seem to be more than an insect. In his existential moment, the officer has chosen magnificence, not only for himself but for all of mankind. Sartre says that when a man makes a choice, he chooses for all mankind because in making the choice, he chooses what he thinks all mankind should be.¹⁰⁷ The troops recognize the officer's choice and approve by charging without orders, thereby choosing magnificence for themselves also. At this point, Bierce's thinking has become more like that of Sartre and Camus than Nietzsche. The young officer has provided value not only for himself, but for others, and thus, he has become a transcendent figure in an existential world.

In making the choice to risk his life, the young officer has initiated the existential moment, not only for himself but for all of the troops who witness his act. The only one who is impervious to him is the commander, and since the commander has agreed to allow the young man to make the attempt, he too has made a choice.

In a highly emotional tale, the commander remains a rock of reason, awash in the waves of emotion all around him. Eventually, the emotion dashes itself to pieces on the stones of the fence, and the commander, and reason, seem to carry the day. Nevertheless, the utter inhumanity of this stone-faced soldier is abhorrent to the reader, and perhaps this abhorrence springs from the fact that the general has been in Bad Faith with his troops and with the reader.

When the young officer dashes madly through the open country, the commander, like his troops, is moved. The narrator reports the eerie sensation of time slowing down, and a palpable silence descends over the troops as the officer rides up the hill. The narrator says, "The burly commander is an equestrian statue of himself (SG, p. 26)." Clearly, the commander is as moved by the spectacle as the lowliest private. Yet when the troops unleash themselves in a frenzied attack, he calls them back. Reason appears to have triumphed. But reason has really gained nothing. The commander has, with a word, transformed his troops from "hounds unleashed" with "burnished arms" to men who "sullenly" follow their colors in retreat, "gathering up the dead (SG, p. 29)." The commander, rather than join the troops as they plunge exultantly through the abyss, tries to "restore order" and therefore, tries to deny his own responsibility in allowing the events to happen in the first place. The commander, a representative of reason, fails and retreats into Bad Faith.

The officer, on the other hand, remains in Good Faith as he heroically faces death, and it is the effect of this action on the other troops that is the real crux of Bierce's story.

If the officer is viewed as an isolated, existential man facing the abyss with magnificent courage, his act becomes transcendent even though it is patently suicidal. Most existentialists consider suicide nihilistic defeat when embraced as in "The Mocking-bird," but in certain instances, suicide can become existential victory, and the action of the young officer is just such an instance.

In "The Myth of Sisyphus," Camus recounts the tale of the man who was condemned by the gods eternally to roll a stone to the top of a mountain, only to see it fall back to the bottom. Sisyphus, Camus says, is "the absurd hero" whose "whole being is exerted toward accomplishing nothing."¹⁰⁸ But Camus sees value in the fact that each time Sisyphus plods back down the mountain to start again, he is truly aware of the futility of his situation, and yet he rolls the rock up the mountain again. As Sisyphus plods along, Camus says "...he is superior to his fate. He is stronger than his rock."¹⁰⁹ Each trek down the mountain is an existential moment for Sisyphus, and it is a moment when he knows he has triumphed over the world for the "struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart."¹¹⁰

Sisyphus is a hero in an existential world, and Bierce's young officer is also such a hero. Sisyphus disobeyed the

gods and in doing so, chose his own condemnation. The young officer also chooses, but he chooses his own death.

By challenging the abyss of the open country, the young officer becomes the isolated symbol of all men. In one central paragraph, Bierce explores the possibilities open to the officer and concludes that there are two possibilities: life and death. The narrator says:

There is no hope except the hope against hope that the crest is clear. True, he might prefer capture to death. So long as he advances, the line will not fire -- why should it? He can safely ride into the hostile ranks and become a prisoner of war. But this would defeat his object. It would not answer our question; it is necessary either that he return unharmed or be shot to death before our eyes. Only so shall we know how to act (SG., p. 27).

The final line can be interpreted two ways. First, it can simply mean that the officer's capture would fail to reveal the information needed about the enemy troops. Alternatively, and with the image of Christ in mind, the line might mean that this "black figure on a white horse" is the leader of these men. He is the pathfinder, searching for a route through the abyss. He is the symbol of mankind itself -- brave, reckless, magnificent -- and he must either die or escape. No half measures will do.

The long, tension-filled buildup suddenly snaps into action when the narrator cries "he has tired of his failure, or sees his error, or has gone mad; he is dashing directly forward at the wall, as if to take it at a leap, hedge and all! (SG, p. 28)"

The officer is inevitably gunned down, but before he is actually hit by a bullet, he stands erect in the field, draws his sword and salutes the troops. "It is a sign to us, to the world, to posterity. It is a hero's salute to death and history (SG, p. 29)."

Though the officer has chosen certain death, he is, like Sisyphus, superior to his fate. Though merely a man, he has gone beyond mankind. The officer has transcended the world and, thus, has given value to his life. In committing suicide with such heroic magnificence, he has chosen the only truly optimistic alternative available in such an existential situation. Had he chosen capture, he would have been in Bad Faith, avoiding the significant possibilities of the situation. Instead, he is, as Camus said, the "human being who is condemned to death" who "is, at least, magnificent before he disappears, and his magnificence is his justification."¹¹¹

The officer, though, is not alone in transcendence. The narrator says, "He is not alone -- he draws all souls after him (SG, p. 26)." The existential moment that the officer has provoked has struck not only himself, but the witnesses among his own troops also. They watch him so they will "know how to act," and his heroic death spurs them into action. "The skirmishers, without orders, against orders, are going forward at a keen run, like hounds unleashed (SG, p. 29)." The very men who were to be saved by the officer's courage are the first to leap into action,

inspired by his bravery. In choosing transcendence for himself, the officer has chosen transcendence for the skirmishers and the rest of the troops, too.

The officer's choice has fulfilled the criteria that Sartre drew for the only optimistic answer to the existential dilemma of providing meaning in a meaningless universe. He has chosen for himself and in so doing, the pattern he has impressed on the cosmos is significant because the troops have declared his "pattern to be good," and he, hopefully, has realized that what he has done has made "it easier for others to live patterns intrinsically satisfying to them."¹¹² By giving meaning to his own life and, therefore, to other lives, the officer's suicidal mission has resulted in the antithesis of Grayrock's despairing suicide. Rather than being defeated by despair, the officer has proven the optimistic possibility of finite transcendence. Every man can be "A Son of the Gods."

It is noteworthy that the situation depicted in "A Son of the Gods" is based on fact. Carey McWilliams reports that Bierce, himself, undertook such a perilous mission at the Battle of Nashville. "I never felt so brave in all my life," Bierce wrote in the July 14, 1883, edition of The Wasp that is quoted by McWilliams. "I dashed forward through every open space into every suspicious looking wood and spurred to the crest of every hill, exposing myself recklessly to draw the Confederate fire and disclose their position."¹¹³ Bierce's heroic act, like the young officer's

heroism, turned out to be useless. In Bierce's case, the enemy had withdrawn.

The incident must have bothered Bierce because he also included a similar act of heroism in "Killed at Resaca." Though Bierce escaped, both of his heroes in the fictional accounts of the incident are killed. Also, in each story, the hero's courage evokes an answering heroism on the part of the troops who witness the action.

It is likely that Bierce never resolved the problem of why he committed such an act of apparent foolishness at Nashville, and the lack of resolution of this problem is a small reflection of the lack of resolution of a much larger philosophical problem -- that of whether one should approach a chaotic universe as an optimist or a pessimist.

In his essays and fiction, Bierce explored the possible solutions to the cosmic problem of the irrational universe, and perhaps it is this exploration, in print, that resulted in the critics' inability to categorize him as the proponent of one particular philosophical stance. He explored realism, stoicism, romanticism, nihilism and naturalism, and within the context of these philosophies, he discovered the elements of what we regard as twentieth century existentialism.

Bierce was a rebel. He spent his life in frustrated revolt against what he perceived as an irrational universe, and like Ivan Karamazov, Bierce "stood halfway between...two positions."¹⁴ Bierce "constantly oscillated between these two extremes: between literature and the will to power, between

the irrational and the rational, the desperate dream and ruthless action."¹¹⁵ Bierce, the man and the author, "really live[d] his problems, torn between the negative and the affirmative."¹¹⁶ It is this struggle that we see reflected not only in the two works examined, but in all of Bierce's war stories and in many of his other works.

The equivocal philosophical position Bierce was forced to adopt resulted in frustration and resentment, emotions that are very effectively expressed in his war stories. He repeatedly used the format of the existential moment when idealistic illusions are lost and are replaced by the reality of the recognition of the irrational cosmos. When he allowed Grayrock to face the existential moment and then commit suicide in despair, Bierce was illustrating the reaction of the pessimistic existentialist to the absurd. Grayrock's suicide was an echo of the cry of Milton's Satan, as reported by Camus: "'So farewell hope, and with hope farewell fear, farewell remorse.... Evil, be thou my good.' It is the cry of outraged innocence."¹¹⁷ Bierce's "suicides in despair" are really the fictional equivalents of his own "cry of outraged innocence."

Even though most of the war stories are marked by frustration and resentment, Bierce did recognize the possibility of finite transcendence as a method of giving value to man, and in this, he approached the final thinking of the modern existentialists which goes beyond a nihilistic acceptance of the irrational universe. In allowing the

young officer to become "A Son of the Gods," Bierce elevated mankind, raising humanity out of the mire of despair into the sunlight of existential affirmation. When he sent the young officer into the open country alone, Bierce affirmed the optimistic modern existentialists' credo. He allowed man to be superior to his fate.

Though Bierce has been considered a pessimist by most critics, the fact that he allowed the young officer to commit meaningful suicide indicates that Bierce was willing to consider an optimistic alternative within the framework of an existential universe. If one allows the possibility of optimism in any form in one's attitude toward the universe, one can neither be called a nihilist nor a pessimist because these terms are exclusive, making any optimism at all impossible. In "finite transcendence," Bierce found a certain optimism within the context of an irrational universe and he illustrates this alternative in "A Son of the Gods" and in other stories. Since Bierce recognized an optimistic alternative, he can be called neither a pessimist nor a nihilist, but he can be called an existentialist. Like many modern existentialists, Bierce accepted the irrational universe, and like them, he attempted to find a way to give value to man's existence. The idea of finite transcendence due to sheer courage marks Bierce as an existential thinker who explored one of the few forms of optimism available in a chaotic cosmos, and Bierce's fictional solution to the dilemma of providing meaning

in an absurd cosmos was a precursor of the optimism of many modern existentialists who showed us how to turn "darkness at noon" into "freedom at midday."¹¹⁸

NOTES

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⁴David R. Weimer, "Ambrose Bierce and the Art of War," in Essays in Literary History, ed. by Rudolph Kirk and C.F. Main (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1960), p. 230.

⁵Woodruff, p. 7.

⁶Woodruff, p. 91.

⁷Eric Solomon, "The Bitterness of Battle: Ambrose Bierce's War Fiction," in Critical Essays on Ambrose Bierce, ed. by Cathy N. Davidson (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1982), p. 193.

⁸C. Hartley Grattan, Bitter Bierce: A Mystery of American Letters (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, Inc., 1966), p. 143.

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¹²Clifton Fadiman, "Ambrose Bierce: Portrait of a Misanthrope," introduction to The Collected Writings of Ambrose Bierce (Secaucus, N.J.: The Citadel Press, 1979), p. xv.

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¹⁴H.L. Mencken, "Ambrose Bierce," in Critical Essays on Ambrose Bierce, ed. by Cathy N. Davidson (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1982), p. 61.

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- ²²Fernando Molina, Existentialism As Philosophy (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-hall, Inc., 1962), p. 98.
- ²³Leo Pollman, Sartre and Camus: Literature of Existence, trans. by Helen and Gregor Sebba (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1967), p. 5.
- ²⁴James N. Edie, "Absence of God" in Christianity and Existentialism, Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy, ed. by John Wild (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1963), p. 118.
- ²⁵Edie, p. 118.
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- ²⁷Neale, p. 162.
- ²⁸Neale, p. 162.
- ²⁹Neale, pp. 162-63.
- ³⁰Ambrose Bierce, The Shadow on the Dial and Other Essays (San Francisco: A.M. Robertson, 1909), p. 145.
- ³¹Bierce, Shadow on the Dial, pp. 155-56.
- ³²Neale, p. 164.

³³Ambrose Bierce, "A Son of the Gods" in The Collected Writings of Ambrose Bierce (Secaucus, N.J.: The Citadel Press, 1979), p. 29. All further references to this story will appear in the text with the designation SG.

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³⁵Solomon, p. 192.

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³⁷Ambrose Bierce, "Finis Aeternitatis" in Black Beetles in Amber (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Literature House/Gregg Press, 1970), p. 38.

³⁸Bierce, Black Beetles, p. 38.

³⁹Jean Paul Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism" in The Existential Mind, ed. by Frederick R. Karl and Leo Hammalian (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Publications, 1974), p. 179.

⁴⁰Edie, p. 117.

⁴¹Solomon, p. 185.

⁴²Edie, p. 119.

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⁵¹Camus, The Rebel, p. 17.

⁵²Solomon, pp. 183-83.

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- ⁶²Sanborn, p. 107.
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- ⁶⁴Karl, p. 33.
- ⁶⁵Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays, trans. by Justin O'Brien (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958), p. 3.
- ⁶⁶Camus, The Rebel, p. 6.
- ⁶⁷Bierce, The Shadow on the Dial, p. 245.
- ⁶⁸Bierce, The Shadow on the Dial, p. 247.
- ⁶⁹Bierce, The Shadow on the Dial, p. 246.
- ⁷⁰Bierce, The Shadow on the Dial, p. 247.
- ⁷¹Bierce, The Shadow on the Dial, p. 245.
- ⁷²Warnock, p. 99.
- ⁷³Ambrose Bierce, Skepticism and Dissent: Selected Journalism from 1898-1901, ed. by Lawrence I. Berkove (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Delmas, 1980), p. 288.

- ⁷⁴Woodruff, p. 76.
- ⁷⁵Ambrose Bierce, "What I Saw of Shiloh" in Ashes of the Beacon, Volume I of The Collected Works of Ambrose Bierce (New York: The Neale Publishing Company, 1909), p. 255.
- ⁷⁶Bierce, "What I Saw of Shiloh," p. 259.
- ⁷⁷Bierce, "What I Saw of Shiloh," pp. 268-69.
- ⁷⁸Pope, p. xxvi.
- ⁷⁹Weimer, p. 237.
- ⁸⁰M.E. Grenander, Ambrose Bierce (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1971), pp. 77-78.
- ⁸¹Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus, p. 16.
- ⁸²Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus, p. 27.
- ⁸³Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus, p. 55.
- ⁸⁴J. Von Rintelen, Beyond Existentialism, trans. by Hilda Graef (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, Publishers, 1961), p. 169.
- ⁸⁵Camus, The Rebel, p. 51.
- ⁸⁶Woodruff, p. 31.
- ⁸⁷Woodruff, p. 135.
- ⁸⁸Ambrose Bierce, "The Mocking-bird," in The Collected Writings of Ambrose Bierce (Secaucus, N.J.: The Citadel Press, 1979), p. 99. Further references to this story appear in the text and are designated MB.
- ⁸⁹Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus, p. 14.
- ⁹⁰Woodruff, p. 74.
- ⁹¹Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus, p. 13.
- ⁹²Woodruff, p. 74.
- ⁹³Harper Lee, To Kill A Mockingbird (Philadelphia: J.B.Lippincott Company, 1960), p. 86.

⁹⁴Arthur E. Miller, "The Influence of Edgar Allan Poe on Ambrose Bierce," American Literature, IV (May, 1932), 137.

⁹⁵Woodruff, p. 67.

⁹⁶Franz Kafka, "Reflections on Sin, Pain, Hope and The True Way," in The Existential Mind, ed. by Frederick Karl and Leo Hammalian (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Publications, 1974), p. 249.

⁹⁷Roubiczek, p. 125.

⁹⁸Camus, The Rebel, p. 7.

⁹⁹Will Durant, The Story of Philosophy (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1961), p. 318.

¹⁰⁰Durant, p. 313.

¹⁰¹Von Rintelen, p.168.

¹⁰²Barnes, pp. 105-106.

¹⁰³Barnes, pp. 106-107.

¹⁰⁴Warnock, p. 115.

¹⁰⁵Barnes, p. 107.

¹⁰⁶Solomon, p. 189.

¹⁰⁷Sartre, p. 176.

¹⁰⁸Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus, p. 120.

¹⁰⁹Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus, p. 121.

¹¹⁰Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus, p. 123.

¹¹¹Camus, The Rebel, p. 51.

¹¹²Barnes, p. 107.

¹¹³McWilliams, p. 45.

¹¹⁴Camus, The Rebel, p. 81.

¹¹⁵Camus, The Rebel, p. 81.

116 Camus, The Rebel, p. 57.

117 Camus, The Rebel, p. 48.

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