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FABLES: A DEVICE OF NARRATIVE OUTPUT WITH INVECTIVE SATIRE IN THE SHORT
STORIES OF AMBROSE BIERCE

MOHANA GOVINDARAJAN¹, VENKATARAMAN R²

¹Research Scholar, Department of English, SCSVMV University, Enathur, Kanchipuram, Tamil Nadu,
India

²Professor of English, Formerly Head, Department of English, SCSVMV University, Enathur,
Kanchipuram, Tamil Nadu, India



ABSTRACT

This Paper is a study of Ambrose Gwinnett Bierce (1842- 1914?), a journalist, satirist, and fiction writer during the last three decades of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth century. As part of his narrative output, he turned to fables and produced over 300 of them, attracted to the fable form apparently because it offered him a medium for control of style, tone, and reader response. The control motif is incorporated thematically in many of the fables as well. As a preliminary to an analysis of Bierce's use of the fable, this study begins with an attempt to identify the generally accepted characteristics of the fable. The study then proceeds to examine Bierce's fables as devices for controlling a moment and to compare the fables with his invective satire and his short stories, in particular.

Key Words: Ambrose Gwinnett Bierce, Fables, Invective satire

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In Bierce's columns, the fable became less a vehicle for general moral lessons particularized in simple narratives and more a device for satire targeting particular follies and foibles in universalized settings. He took the offensive in print against politicians who had their hands in the public till; against hypocritical Christians who exploited and maligned non-Christians; against financiers who, for their own private gain, bilked the government and the taxpayers; against cant, corruption, dishonesty, chasm, and egoism anywhere he found it. Through the fables he informed his readers by exposing the rogues in their midst; he swayed public opinion by provoking his readers to think; and he entertained his readers by creating witty narratives that frequently turned on them as well as on Bierce's primary targets.

He wrote more than 300 fables, some of them for British periodicals during his three-and-a-half-year stay in England from March of 1872 to September of 1875, and set a pattern for satire that would be followed by twentieth century writers such as James Thurber, William March, and Robert Coover. He capitalized on the traditional elements of the fable form and invested his own fables with thought provoking wit and pervasive irony. Before one can analyze Bierce's use of this form, however, one must first try to arrive at a working definition of fable.

Since the aim of this paper is to explore all the possible advantages the fable form might provide for a writer like Bierce, a writer committed to short forms of literature, to wit and satire, and to correctness of form and style, no one critical theory will dictate an approach to analysis. The unifying thesis is that Bierce exhibited a propensity to try to control his material and his reader's response, and yet he realized at the same time, and even illustrated in some of his fables, how inevitably and paradoxically futile such an effort is.

Bierce, who preferred to be identified as a satirist rather than a humorist, aimed his wit at a number of targets. When the targets were too specific, however, only the historical moment was served, and pieces such as those collected in *Black Beetles in Amber* seem dated today. Thus of all the short satirical forms with which he experimented—the brief invective portraits, the epitaphs, the ironic definitions, and the fables—only the definitions and the fables retain that continuing timeliness of the timeless. In both forms, a general statement is the focus.

Most current dictionary definitions of fable agree on two basic characteristics: fables are brief, and fables have a moral. Thrall, Hibbard, and Holman, in *A Handbook to Literature* offer this initial statement to describe a fable: "A brief tale, either in prose or verse, told to point a moral" (196). Barnet, Berman, and Burto, in *A Dictionary of Literary Terms* begin similarly: "A brief moral tale, in verse or prose. . ." (41). A typical dictionary definition is that found in the *Random House American College Dictionary*: "a short tale to teach a moral. . ." (430).

To sum up the definitions, a fable traditionally is short; it contains or implies a moral; it frequently, but not always, features animal characters; its subject matter may be supernatural or at least non-historical, derived from folklore, legend, or myth; and it is aimed often at children. Thus far definitions focus on form, function, source, and audience. One can see that the combination of the fable form with the author's satiric intent is an ideal merger for illustrating attempted control and paradoxical outcomes. Bierce had his own definite ideas about the form and function of the fable, and he experimented with these ideas to produce some of his most durable short narratives.

The fable offers control of form and of style within that form which distinguished Bierce's work throughout his career; and he was only one of several American writers, many of them journalists, from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century's to adopt and adapt the fable form. Others included Joel Chandler Harris (1848-1908), George Ade (1866-1944), William March (1893-1954), and James Thurber (1894-1961).

As a journalist, more specifically a columnist, Bierce was trying to control more than just his form and style; he was trying also to control public opinion. To that end, he wrote first for the moment, for the immediate present-day audience that bought the periodicals for which he produced his columns. A number of Bierce's fables expose vice and folly by satirically turning his readers around so that they can see the "reprehensible qualities" he alludes to, even if by so doing he will be "regarded as a sour-spirited knave," another way of saying he is bitter. His satire is driven by wit, the function of which he describes in a *News-Letter* column dated 1871:

We hold that the true function of wit is not to make one writhe with merriment, but with anguish; it is not a sportive cow gamboling absurdly in a pasture, but a vicious horse latent in a stall, who kicks you in the bowels as you pass unconsciously behind him. (Satanic 24)

Such measures he deems necessary to get the attention of complacent, "unconscious" readers. His fables ironically undercut the expectations of readers and characters alike as he turns us all around to look in another direction. The tale of the sheep and the shepherd is an example:

A Sheep making a long journey found the heat of her fleece insupportable, and seeing a flock of others in a fold, evidently in expectation, leaped in and joined them in the hope of being shorn. Perceiving the Shepherd approaching, and the other sheep huddling into a remote corner of the fold, she shouldered her way forward and said:

"Your flock is insubordinate; it is fortunate that I came along to set them an example of docility. Seeing me operated on, they will be encouraged to offer themselves."

"Thank you," said the Shepherd, "but I never kill more than one at a time. Mutton does not keep well in warm weather." (VI, 331)

The sheep in this fable and the oyster in the earlier one are looking out for themselves and think they are in control of a situation. Their mistaken perceptions cost them their lives, and Bierce's ironic wit is called bitter and mordant. It may be, but it is also a means to an end. It dictates the brief thrusts of the pen in what Blackham characterizes as the "descriptive" rather than "prescriptive" function of the fable (252). And whatever "unconscious wisdom" a fabulist such as the one Bierce describes might choose to share demands finally to be considered by those souls who may then be enlightened.

McWilliams argues that "Bierce was not essentially a cynic or skeptic but rather an idealist, more accurately perhaps a moralist" (xviii) — a moralist who wrote fables, one might add. Bierce's skepticism may, in fact, be evidence of perceptive analysis rather than universal doubt. Consider the fable of the lion and the lamb:

"The Millennium is come," said a Lion to a Lamb inside the fold. "Come out and let us lie down together, as it has been foretold that we shall."

"Have you brought along the little child that is to lead us?" the Lamb asked.

"No; I thought that perhaps a child of the shepherd would serve."

"I distrust a Millennium that requires the shepherd to supply both the feast and the leader of the revel. My notion of that happy time is that it is to be a period in which mutton is unfit to eat and a lion the product of the sculptor's art."

Finding no profit in dissimulation, the Lion walked thoughtfully away and candidly dined on the village priest. (VI, 335)

Whatever may be suggested about the church or the priesthood by the conclusion of the fable, the fact that the lamb is enough of a thinker to be skeptical of the lion makes for him a happy ending.

Ambrose Bierce, with his flair for wit and compression, helped revive the literary fable and make it work for him as a means of conveying his own perceptions of truth and as an effort to control the immediate and to capture the universalized moment. His definition of fable emphasizes its paradoxical nature as well as its instructional purpose, but his definition did not first appear in *The Cynic's Word Book* (1906), later published as *The Devil's Dictionary in The Collected Works*. It was not until 1967, with the publication of *The Enlarged Devil's Dictionary*, compiled and edited by Ernest Jerome Hopkins, that Bierce's assessment of the fable became readily available. His definition is concise, a single phrase: A fable, he says, is "A brief lie intended to illustrate some important truth" (90). He then includes a fable to illustrate:

A statue of Eve and the Apple was accosted by a hippopotamus on a show-bill.

"Give me a bite of your apple," said the hippopotamus, and see me smile." "I would," said Eve, making a rough estimate of the probable dimensions of the smile, "but I have promised a bite to the Mammoth Cave, another to the crater of Vesuvius, and a third to the interval between the lowest anthropoid Methodist and the most highly organized wooden Indian. I must be just before I am generous." (90)

Bierce attaches a moral with this concluding sentence: "This fable teaches that Justice and Generosity do not go hand in hand, the hand of Generosity being commonly thrust into the pocket of Justice" (90). There is nothing new or remarkable in Bierce's idea about what a fable is. What is worthy of note is how Bierce says what he says. By pairing opposites, lie and truth, he both recognizes and reveals the conflict and ironic paradox in the very nature and make-up of the fables that others have only partially determined or hinted at. And he has done it in only seven words. What is immediately interesting about the tale is that the characters are not Eve and a hippopotamus but artistic representations of Eve and a hippopotamus in the popular culture, a statue and a show-bill illustration. As such they are made public figures abstracted from reality and put on display, accentuating the representational and fantastic characteristics of the fable.

Considering the fables are but one part of Bierce's narrative output, one can examine them in relation to certain of his other works. The general theme of control can be traced through a number of Bierce's

narratives, as it contributes to the conflict so essential in storytelling. *The Coup de Grace* compares with two fables treating the same theme, and only by reading the three selections together does one get the full impact of the ironic paradox Bierce presents in the story. Other stories in which the control theme is particularly evident are *George Thurston: Three Incidents in the Life of a Man, A Son of the Gods, and A Horseman in the Sky*. In each case, the unthinking protagonist relies on some sort of rigid code and responds to it almost mechanically so that his effort to control himself or others is doomed. He is, after all, a fool. The only control possible, even for a moment, is that prompted by thought.

Happiness, a rare but not altogether non-existent commodity in Bierce's fiction, defies control, as the tale *Haita the Shepherd* illustrates. A complementary fable is *The Secret of Happiness*. In both the tale and the fable the message is that happiness does exist, but it cannot be planned or controlled intellectually. To encounter it is a serendipitous moment. Reading these and other stories and fables together one discovers significant correspondences suggesting that Bierce's fabular techniques and themes carry over in his longer narratives. Thus, the value of the fable for Bierce and his successors is its ability to control the immediate historical moment and yet, because of its ability to generalize the particular, to capture the truth of that moment for all time. Specific responses to specific wars or specific graft or corruption or scandal allegorized into fables become representative responses to all wars, all graft and corruption or scandal.

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