The Boarded Window Study Guide

The Boarded Window by Ambrose Bierce

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Introduction

To contemporary audiences, Ambrose Bierce is known for his writings—journalism, essays, and short fictions—for his cynicism and his misanthropy, and for his famous disappearance into revolution- torn Mexico in 1913, an adventure from which he never returned. His literary reputation, however, rests primarily on his short stories of the Civil War and the supernatural. In both of these genres, Bierce explores his interest in bizarre forms of death and the horror of existence in a meaningless world. Shortly before his disappearance, Bierce also took on the monumental task of organizing his body of work into the twelve-volume *Collected Works of Ambrose Bierce.* In the second volume of this work, amongst the gripping Civil War tales which perhaps have brought him his greatest renown, Bierce chose to included the slight "weird tale" "The Boarded Window."

"The Boarded Window" is not a popular story; that is, reviewers rarely discuss it and reference to it among Bierce scholars is almost nonexistent. Critics who have paid it attention have generally commented on its surprise and sudden ending. The story deals with a turning point in a man's life, one which has the ability to completely change his future. Murlock believes that his seemingly dead wife has returned as a ghost and as fear immobilizes him, she actually does die a most horrific death. While Bierce artfully reverses the supernatural element of the plot, the story still contains the essence of its enigmatic author. Though masquerading as a ghost story, "The Boarded Window" conceals within its words an even greater mystery of the relationship among its characters. This mystery is one to which Bierce proposes no easy answers.

Author Biography

Ambrose Bierce was born in Ohio in 1842. He lived in the Midwest during his childhood, but he attended the Kentucky Military Institute in 1859. When the Civil War broke out, he enlisted in the Union army. He fought bravely in the battles of Shiloh and Chickamauga and participated in Sherman's March to the Sea. After the war ended, Bierce traveled with a military expedition to San Francisco, where, in 1867, he left the army.

Bierce's poetry and prose began appearing in the *Californian* magazine around that time. In 1868, he began to work as the editor of the *News Letter* for which he wrote his famous "Town Crier" column. He quickly became an important figure in California literary society, establishing friendships with Mark Twain and Bret Harte. In 1872, however, Bierce left the United States for a three-year stay in England where he wrote for several magazines. In England, he acquired the nickname that has stuck with him to this day—"Bitter Bierce." During this period as well, his first three books of literary sketches were published.

After returning to California, Bierce worked in the editorial departments of several magazines. In 1887, he began writing for William Randolph Hearst's *San Francisco Examiner.* In his regular column, he published many short stories, essays, and epigrams. Many of these pieces were later published in his short story collections.

When publishers lacked the enthusiasm for *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians*, Bierce's friend, the merchant E.L.G. Steele, paid for its publication himself. The volume then came out in England the following year—1892—under the title *In the Midst of Life.* Steele also brought out another story collection, *Can Such Things Be?* (1893). Many of the stories in the first collection draw on Bierce's civil war experiences, while the majority in the second are tales of the supernatural.

During this period, Bierce kept busy writing and acquiring a group of "pupils"—fledgling writers who wrote to him for advice and criticism. However, at the beginning of 1900, Bierce decided to move to the East Coast, where he spent his last years. He continued pursuing his journalism and consolidated his literary position, particularly through his own management of his *Collected Works,* a 12- volume work that took him four years to produce.

In 1913 Bierce left for Mexico, intending to join Pancho Villa's revolutionary forces as an observer of the Mexican civil war. From there he expected, if possible, to go to South America. He wrote to friends of the possibility that he might never return. Indeed, his last know whereabouts were Ojinga, Mexico, where he was seen going into battle in January 1914. After this event, Bierce was never heard from again. No one knows how or when he died, but noted biographer and scholar M.E. Grenader believes that he died in that battle on January 11, 1914. One of the rebel officers heard later that an "old gringo" had been shot during the fighting.

Plot Summary

The story opens with an unnamed narrator recalling years past, back in 1830, when the area around Cincinnati was almost unbroken forest. A man named Murlock lived alone in a small log house. Murlock kept to himself, making his living by bartering animal skins. The most noted aspect of the house was a window, directly opposite the front door, that was boarded up. Nobody could remember a time that this window was not boarded, yet no one knew why, except for this narrator, who learned Murlock's story from his grandfather.

At the time of his death, Murlock was about 50 but looked decades older. Murlock had come to the frontier while still a young man. He lived in his cabin with his wife. It would appear that the couple lived happily, for Murlock's life after her death was that of a lonely, burdened man.

One day when Murlock returns home from hunting, he finds his wife sick with fever. As they have no neighbors or nearby physician, Murlock tries to nurse her back to health. His efforts are unsuccessful, however, and she falls into a state of unconsciousness and apparently dies without ever recovering awareness.

Murlock thus sets about preparing her body for burial. He conducts this task stoically, and it occurs to him that he should be more saddened at the loss of his wife. He tells himself that after he buries her, he will miss her; for the present moment, he must convince himself that things are not as bad as they seem. The narrator supposes that Murlock, who had no experience with grief, was experiencing a sort of numbing at his wife's death.

After he finishes preparing the body, Murlock sits down feeling utterly tired. Through the open window he hears an unearthly sound, perhaps a wild animal, but perhaps it is a dream, for Murlock is already asleep. A few hours later he is suddenly awakened. He listens intently, wondering what woke him up. Then he hears, or thinks he hears, a soft step—it sounds like bare feet walking upon the floor. Terrified, Murlock neither cries nor calls out.

Instead, he waits in the darkness. He tries to speak his wife's name but finds no sound will come. Then he hears something even more dreadful—the sound of some heavy body throwing itself against the table upon which his wife lay. He hears and feels something fall on the floor so heavily the whole house shakes. Next he hears the sounds of a scuffling. Murlock places his hands on the table, but is horrified to discover his wife is not there.

At this point, his terror turns to madness, which drives him to action. He springs to the wall and grabs his loaded rifle. He shoots the rifle without even aiming. In the flare of the gunpowder, he sees a giant panther dragging his dead wife toward the window by the throat. Suddenly, Murlock loses consciousness.

When he awakens the next day, he sees his wife's body near the window where the cat dropped her before fleeing. She lies in disarray. Underneath her collects a pool of wet, runny bloody from the wound on her throat. Her hands are clenched. Between her teeth is a piece of the cat's ear.

Summary

The Boarded Window is set in 1830 in a small frontier forest near what is now the city of Cincinnati. Pioneers, most of whom stay a short time before pushing further west, sparsely populate the forest. The story centers on an exceptional citizen, Murlock, who is one of the first inhabitants to arrive, who lives alone and ekes out a meager existence by trading in animal skins. It is obvious that at some point in the past, the man had lived a different life. The land bears evidence of an attempt at farming, but the stumps of the trees he had once cleared are now partially obscured by new growth.

The man's small log house is a poor affair with a chimney of sticks, warped clapboards, a single door and a window. It is this boarded up window that is a curiosity for most, who never remember a time it was open. The all-knowing narrator claims to know the secret of the boarded-up window. He begins by painting a picture of his subject, a man named Murlock, who looks seventy but is thought to be only fifty. "Something besides years had had a hand in his aging," he says as he describes the tall but stooped figure with a full gray beard and wrinkled face as a "burden bearer." Although his imagery is crisp, the narrator confesses to never having seen the man himself, but to getting the description and the story of Murlock's life from his grandfather, a neighbor who had known him before his life changed.

Upon Murlock's death, probably from natural causes, his body is buried near the cabin alongside the grave of his wife. She had died so many years earlier that there was little evidence of her existence at all, save her final resting place. It would have been the end of the tale, the narrator says, had his grandfather not supplied the rest of the story.

Murlock's life had begun with much promise. He was young and strong when he built the cabin, cleared the fields and hunted in the nearby woods. He had brought a bride to share his adventuresome lot. The narrator finds evidence of their love and affection in Murlock's unwillingness to leave his wife, even after her death.

After a day of hunting, Murlock returns home to find his wife delirious with fever. With no physician or neighbor to help, he attempts to nurse her back to health. She dies on the third day of her illness. Despite his shock and the anticipation of overwhelming grief, Murlock tries to follow tradition and prepare the body for burial. He lays her on the table, dresses her, fixes her hair, crosses her wrists and ties them together. Planning to dig her grave and make her coffin the following day, he sinks into a chair, exhausted, folding his arms on the table and resting his head.

Murlock sleeps, but in his sleep he hears a wailing through the window coming closer and closer. He does not move, but some hours later awakens, not knowing why, and strains his eyes to see something, but he doesn't know what he is looking for. He feels the table shake and thinks he hears steps on the floor. He is terrified beyond reaching for his wife or crying out. He then hears some heavy body hurled against the table and feels the table strike his chest sharply. A scuffling ensues. Murlock flings his hands on the table, but finds nothing there.

Murlock gropes for his gun and fires. In the flash that lights up the room, he sees an enormous panther dragging his wife's body from the room, his teeth fixed in her throat. Murlock passes out. When he wakes a second time, the sun is high. He finds the body in disarray at the window where the frightened cat has left it. Blood from her throat is not quite coagulated. The ribbon with which he bound her wrists is broken and her hands are tightly clenched. In her teeth is a piece of the animal's ear.

Analysis

The *Boarded Window* is one of many Ambrose Bierce stories in which he explores a fascination with the macabre. The setting for the story, a frontier town in the early to mid 1800s, is also reflective of his adventuresome lifestyle. The all-knowing narrator, who confesses he is merely retelling a story first told to him by his grandfather, tells the tale. This kind of narrative sets a tone of suspense and foreboding. The story unfolds, in true short story form, as the central and sole character of Murlock is explored.

The catalyst for the story is a boarded up window in Murlock's home, which is also a symbol for Murlock himself. Just as no one in the present remembers a time when it wasn't boarded up nor why, and no one knows Murlock anymore. His life, too, seems as closed to warmth and light as his home must be, and both are due to the boarded-up window. However, the narrator makes sure the reader knows that Murlock is not adverse to the sun, and that there is a deeper, darker reason for the crude way in which he has shut himself inside. The window and Murlock share a secret.

People instinctively know this, and as the narrator points out, there are a number of clues. The clues are present in the property and in the body of the man who owns it. The stumps, half covered with new growth, indicate that Murlock led a different kind of life at one time, that something has happened that has left him unwilling to resume his former life. Whereas now he ekes out an existence hunting and trades for necessities, at one time he farmed and provided for himself. Murlock is said to look twenty years older than he is, and speculation is that something other than years has aged him.

Murlock's house, too, has been ill cared for. The description of his aging and dilapidated home is a metaphor for the man. The sagging, warped clapboards belong to a neglected house and a dispirited man. Both the land and home clearly lack a woman's touch.

Until Murlock's death, most neighbors had forgotten that he had a wife. It is likely his burial in a grave next to hers that prompts the narrator's grandfather to pass along the rest of the story. The mood of the tale is dark and mysterious and culminates with the telling of the life-changing event that left a wreck of a man in a wreck of a house.

Murlock returns home from a hunting trip to find his wife quite ill. His attempts to care for her fail, and she dies. He goes through the motions of preparing her body for burial, all the while unable to cry, feeling that his wife doesn't seem dead to him somehow. Among

the traditions he follows is the binding of the deceased's hands, a practical means of ensuring that after rigor mortis sets in, the body will be well aligned and fit into a coffin.

Murlock sleeps next to the body, but it is unclear whether what happens next is real or part of a dream. He believes he hears wailing, but wakes hours later. It is dark, and Murlock feels a presence in the room, hears footsteps, and then feels the table move. He is seized by that kind of overwhelming fear that leaves one unable to cry out or move. When he overcomes this fear and reaches for his wife's body, it isn't there. He panics, finds his rife and fires. In the flash, he sees a dark beast dragging his wife's body toward the window, his teeth in her throat. The panther is as dark as the woods that surround the house and represents the danger lurking beyond the house Murlock has built, the land he has cultivated, and the home he has made with his wife.

Murlock faints from the shock of this confrontation or from his fears of what might happen next. When he wakes again, he finds the panther has left the body in disarray below the window. It is then that he makes the discovery that changes his life. First, the blood from his wife's throat is not quite coagulated. In addition, the ribbon with which he bound her wrists is broken and her hands are tightly clenched; in her teeth is a piece of the animal's ear.

Apparently, Murlock's wife had not died as his senses had been telling him all along. Her fever had merely broken and she was sleeping. He had bound her wrists and kept her from defending herself when the panther attacked. While the narrator first speculates that Murlock's unwillingness to leave his wife even after her death is evidence of his love and affection for her, the reader is now left to believe that his motivation may be guilt. That same guilt has left Murlock as isolated from his community emotionally as his homestead is physically.

Murlock is a husband and a frontiersman who fails to fulfill his role as protector, and in doing so loses his life's companion. Further, he believes his wife dies as a direct result of his ineptness in the face of her illness and death. His feelings of unworthiness leave him shut off from the outside world much as his home is. While he boards up the window to keep danger at bay and to regain some sense of safety in the world, it is likely that the window simply reminds him of the terrible thing that has happened, and this silent testament keeps him in this place beyond any redemption.

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Characters

Murlock

Murlock is the protagonist of this brief story. He is first introduced to the readers by the narrator after his death as a lonely, prematurely aged man, one who scarcely had a personal connection to anyone in his community. He lived the life of a recluse in his cabin in the forest. Yet, years and years ago, Murlock had been an optimistic young. Ambrose Bierce man, forging a new life in rural Ohio. His world changes one night when his wife falls grievously ill and lapses into a coma-like state. Murlock believes she is dead and feels guilty because he experiences little grief or even any emotional reaction. However, his wife is not yet dead, and she ends up dying a particularly horrible death that night; it is most horrible because Murlock can never know the true extent of his role in her death. After this wrenching event, Murlock draws within himself and lives the rest of his days in apparent misery.

Murlock's Wife

Murlock's wife died when she was a young woman. The narrator supposes her to have been "in all ways worthy of his [Murlock's] honest devotion" and one who "shared the dangers and privations of [Murlock's] lot with a willing spirit and a light heart." The wife falls dangerously ill with fever and falls into a coma-like state, but Murlock believes her to be dead. He prepares her body for burial, including binding her wrists. However, as Murlock learns, she is not dead. That night, a panther creeps into the cabin and grabs her by the throat. Apparently, she fights back. When Murlock discovers her dead body the next day—seemingly she died from the wound to the throat—she has a piece of the panther's ear between her teeth.

The Narrator

The Narrator The unnamed narrator never meets Murlock, but learns of his sad tale from his grandfather. As a boy, the narrator, aware of the rumors of a ghost haunting Murlock's cabin, ventures near it and throws a rock at it. Little else is known about the narrator, particularly his relation to Murlock or why he concerns himself with the story or knows its details.

Themes

Death

Death is one of the most important themes in "The Boarded Window." When Murlock's wife falls into a coma-like state, he mistakenly believes she is dead. In fact, she is not dead, but Murlock turns out to contribute to, if not actually cause, her death. His unconscious wife is attacked by a panther while Murlock sleeps. He awakens and views the horrible sight of the great cat dragging what he believes to be his dead wife's body. When he immediately loses consciousness, Murlock loses any chance he might have had of stanching the flow of blood from her wound and thus saving her life.

The idea of death, and the effect it has on the living, can also be seen throughout the story. Murlock's frenzied action in shooting the rifle stems from the knowledge that his dead wife is not where he left her on the table. He seems to believe that her ghost has returned, though the story is so brief that such a theory is only hinted at, not explored.

Murlock also suffers a symbolic death after the real death of his wife. He ages rapidly, keeps to himself, and isolates himself from the rest of society. In essence, he ceases to live in the real world. His suffering can most likely be attributed to his guilt at his role in his wife's death.

The Supernatural

Bierce is known for excelling in what S.T. Joshi has called the "weird tale," which can be loosely defined as a tale that has a certain atmosphere of unexplainable dread coming from unknown forces, as well as the hint that somehow events have transformed the fixed laws of nature. Joshi further notes that of Bierce's weird tales, the majority fall under the subset of supernatural horror tales. Certainly, parts of "The Boarded Window read like a ghost story. Murlock's fear when he wakes in the middle of the night reflects his feeling that something supernatural is taking place. He hears what seem to be bare feet on the floor, yet he knows this is not possible. His utter terror can only stem from his belief that his wife has risen - as a ghost. The language Bierce employs also points to this analysis: Murlock had previously heard an "unearthly cry" and now he hears a "confusion of sounds impossible to describe." Ironically, there is nothing supernatural taking place. The sound he heard earlier was most likely the shrill cry of the panther, and the scuffling sounds are clearly his wife attempting to get away from the cat. Yet, Murlock's wrenching fear and belief in the supernatural contribute to the demise of his wife.

Loneliness

The prevailing mood in "The Boarded Window" is that of utter loneliness. Murlock's abandoned cabin is "ruined," distant from any neighbors, and surrounded by a gloomy,

silent forest. Murlock had formerly cleared the land, but now it is covered with decaying tree stumps and is in the midst of being overtaken by wild plants. Murlock himself had never been seen to smile "nor speak a needless word." Only the occasional hunters who pass by the cabin see evidence of Murlock's enjoyment of life as he sits on his doorstep enjoying the sunshine. He dies alone in his cabin, to be found later by some unnamed person. He is buried near his cabin, doomed to spend eternity in that barren, forsaken place.

Murlock also seems to have little capacity to understand what loneliness means. When his wife dies, he is not struck by grief. He is surprised by his own inability to cry. The narrator shares his belief that to some people grief comes "as the blows of a bludgeon, which in crushing benumbs," and hypothesizes that is the grief that later befalls Murlock. However, the story strongly suggests that it is not actually the loss of his wife but his role in her death that turns him into a reclusive curmudgeon.

Style

Narrator and Narration

The narration of "The Boarded Window" raises significant questions: Who is this unnamed narrator? More importantly, what is his relation to Murlock? Why is he so interested in Murlock? How does he know so many details about the night in question? Bierce answers none of these questions in this brief tale.

The narrator, as he tells the reader, grew up near Murlock's cabin. As a boy—knowing of the ghost that haunted the spot—he visited the ruined cabin and threw a stone against its outer wall. His only other association with Murlock is the distinction of being one of the few people to know the secret of the boarded window, which his grandfather related to him. Other than these details, the reader finds out little about the narrator.

The beginning of the narration sets up the background, providing sketchy details of the region, Murlock, his marriage, and his ultimate death after having become a prematurely aged man. Once the narrator ventures into Murlock's story, however, he generally resides in the man's head, though at times he does make outside observations. The narrator, however, imagines himself privy to thoughts only Murlock could know, such as what he says to himself as he prepares his wife's body and the terror he feels when he awakens in the night. The narration stops abruptly upon Murlock's discovery of his dead wife on the floor. The narrator, who has been so willing to commit himself to exposing Murlock's private thoughts, makes no comment about how the man now feels, though he has earlier hinted at the devastation that would so radically alter the man's life.

Setting

The setting of "The Boarded Window" plays a key role in the development of the terror plot. Murlock's cabin is situated far away from neighbors in the middle of a great forest where wild beasts—such as the panther—lurk. Murlock and his wife live in solitude. Because of this, when she falls ill, Murlock must care for her alone. His isolation—along with his wife's supposed death—contribute to his great terror when he hears strange noises in the night.

Further, the narrator paints a picture of a bleak and desolate area. The forest that surrounds Murlock's cabin is characterized as one of "gloom and silence." Indeed, most of the people, according to the narrator, who first settled the region quickly moved on westward. These details foster the psychological setting of emptiness and detachment, characteristics shared by Murlock, who dies the lonely man's solitary death.

Structure

Structurally, the story is divided into two parts. The first part provides the readers with relevant background information. Readers learn about the region and who settled there, as well as a few specific details about Murlock's cabin and his life: when Murlock came to Ohio filled with optimism and plans, how he built a cabin, cleared the surrounding land, and loved his spirited young wife. This part of the story also gives the end, telling of how Murlock changed and died a recluse.

The second part of the story presents the connecting event that turned the hopeful young man into a prematurely old man. In this part of the story, the narration is firmly fixed on Murlock, presenting his thoughts, worries, and fears. This section reads profoundly differently from that which came before it. The unnamed narrator takes little part here, and indeed the narration is rooted in concrete, specific details, rather than abstract vague ones. This section is also a mini-story in itself, complete with a beginning —the wife's illness and apparent death; middle—Murlock's fear at the strange sounds he hears; and end—his wife's real death.

Historical Context

The Lure of the Frontier

The first pioneers crossed the Appalachian Mountains and moved into the Ohio River valley in the 1750s. These settlers found large stands of oak, maple, and hickory and forests full of wild game such as turkey and deer. The soil was rich, and they began to clear land for farming. Despite the promising conditions, movement to the region was slow, and settlements generally remained small and isolated. In the next decade, however, as the British victory in the French and Indian War reduced white people's concerns about Indian raids, settlers began crossing the Appalachians in greater numbers. Despite a proclamation in 1763 that banned further colonial settlement west of the Appalachians, settlers continued to come both to farm the land and trade in goods.

The Battle for the Frontier

By the late 1700s, enough Americans had settled in the region that today consists of Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois that Native Americans, fearing they would lose their land, tried to push them back. In 1790, an Indian confederation went to battle against U.S. troops. Despite early victories, the Native Americans were eventually defeated. The ensuing peace treaty formally ceded much of present- day Ohio and part of present-day Indiana to the United States. This treaty opened up the area even further for rapid white settlement. Soon whites had expanded into lands that were not included in the peace treaty. Throughout the early 1800s, thousands of Americans poured into the Northwest Territory.

Britain, however, continued to post soldiers in the region. The British also armed Native Americans, who then used these weapons against American settlers. The British presence in the Northwest Territory was a major cause for the American declaration of war against Britain. The United States won the ensuing War of 1812, which guaranteed the U.S. government control of the Northwest Territory.

Connecting the Frontier

Developments in transportation helped connect the frontier to markets back east. In 1814, construction began on a road that went from Cumberland, Maryland, to Wheeling, West Virginia, a town on the Ohio River. In the 1830s, this road was extended to Columbus, Ohio, and within a few decades it reached all the way to Illinois. Completed in 1825, the Erie Canal, which stretched from Buffalo, New York, on Lake Erie, to Albany, New York, also opened up the nation's largest port city. The Erie Canal encouraged settlement and also allowed Americans in what was then considered the Middle West to get their goods to eastern consumers and import supplies in a more expedient fashion. These improvements in transportation made their lives easier and induced more people to move west.

Life on the Frontier

Despite the availability of amenities, in the mid-1800s, life on the frontier differed greatly from life back east. People often lived in sparse log cabins. Many supported themselves as farmers, growing wheat and corn, and raising hogs. Farmers found their work growing increasingly easier and more productive. The Industrial Revolution had led to greater technological advances, and by the middle of the century, farmers' toil was greatly improved by such inventions as the steel plow and the reaper. More and more merchants continued to arrive in the Middle West. They sold manufactured goods that they brought or imported from the East Cost and opened stores to satisfy the needs of the Middle West consumers.

BOOKRAGS

Critical Overview

"The Boarded Window" saw its first major publication in 1909, when it was collected, along with most of the stories from 1891's *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians,* in the second volume of the *Collected Works of Ambrose Bierce,* a 12-volume set. The majority of stories in the book, which had been republished in 1892 under the new title *In the Midst of Life,* concerned the Civil War, with the notable exceptions of the other world fantasies "An Inhabitant of Carcosa," "Haita the Shepherd," and "The Middle Toe of the Right Foot." In putting together his collected works, however, Bierce omitted any overtly supernatural tales from volume 2, placing them instead with other like stories in volume 3. At the same time, he added "The Boarded Window," which hints at the supernatural but does not truly involve it. Bierce scholar S.T. Joshi is one of the few to note this significant rearrangement on Bierce's part. He contends that such shifting is "of vital importance to Bierce's aesthetic of horror, for the dominant motive at work is the segregation of his supernatural and non-supernatural tales."

When volume 2 of The Collected Works was published in 1909, Bierce again drew critical attention. A reviewer for *The Athenaeum* wrote that "this collection of short stories might fitly have borne the name of one of them, 'A Holy Terror.'" The reviewer believes that the difficulty Bierce had in originally publishing the book in 1891 (it was published through the donation of funds from an individual) stemmed from the more sedate literary tastes of that day. The reviewer finds that most of the stories are "a study of the workings of fear. . . . Perhaps 'The Boarded Window' reaches the outer limit of the terrible."

Again, in 1918, *In the Midst of Life,* which now included "The Boarded Window," saw a new edition. A reviewer from *The Nation* asserted that "the four or five among these [Civil War] tales which are touched with tragic pity and terror are compromised by their enforced fellowship with stories which are mere gruesome inventions." Although "The Boarded Window" is not specifically mentioned, the reviewer's statement that "the tales rest their effect too much on the surprise ending which Bierce, before 'O. Henry,' somewhat over-employed" certainly would seem to apply.

"The Boarded Window" has rarely drawn critical notice. One of the rare instances of its inclusion in discussion of Bierce's some 100 short stories can be found in Walter Blackburne Harte's "A Tribute to Ambrose Bierce" published in 1924's *The Biblio.* "'The Boarded Window,'" he wrote, "holds one in a thrill of expectation; but the climax, told so tersely, comes with the shock of sudden horror."

Indeed, Bierce's reputation rests more on war fiction, such as "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," which delves into the psychological state of a man as he is being hanged, or "Chickamauga," which depicts a young boy crawling among a battlefield strewn with the bodies of dead and dying soldiers. The noted supernatural writer H.P. Lovecraft, however, in his 1939 essay *Supernatural Horror in Literature,* pointed out that little distinction between Bierce's war fiction and weird fiction existed; they have a similar overarching effect on the reader. Bierce's "artistic reputation must rest upon his grim

and savage short stories," Lovecraft wrote. "Virtually all of Bierce's tales are tales of horror; and whilst many of them treat only of the physical and psychological horrors within Nature, a substantial portion admit the malignly supernatural and form a leading element in America's fund of weird literature." Lovecraft also quotes the poet and critic Samuel Loveman, who was also a personal acquaintance of Bierce's: "In Bierce the evocation of horror becomes for the first time not so much the prescription or prevention of Poe and Maupassant, but an atmosphere definite and uncannily precise. Words, so simple that one would be prone to ascribe them to the limitations of a literary hack, take on an unholy terror, a new and unguessed transformation."

Indeed, an entire body of Bierce's "weird tales" - tales which deal with unknown, dread-inspiring forces and rely on the reversal of the fixed laws of nature - do exist. In his introduction to *The Weird Tale*, Joshi categorizes most of Bierce's weird tales as "supernatural horror," but a few fall under the category of "quasi science fiction." The main difference between these two types is that the former take place "where the ordinary world of our daily lives is presupposed by the norm," and the latter provide a rational explanation for the "'impossible' intrusions." Bierce also dabbled in "non-supernatural horror." Joshi contends that a close reading of Bierce's weird tales "will show that in almost every case he provides sufficient clues to point to a supernatural or non-supernatural resolution."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Korb has a master's degree in English literature and creative writing and has written for a wide variety of educational publishers. In the following essay, she discusses the many mysterious elements inherent in "The Boarded Window."

Ambrose Bierce is a well-known literary figure for many reasons. He was a man out of time; his pessimistic, cynical writings were oddly out of place in a period dominated by optimist thought; he introduced psychological studies into a literary world that valued realism and naturalism. He is the author of the brutal and realistic Civil War short stories "Chickamauga" and "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" and the witty, ironical Devil's Dictionary. During the 1890s, he was one of America's most famous newspaper columnists. Bierce's flight to Mexico in 1913, to join up with Pancho Villa's revolutionaries, and his subsequent disappearance, only added fuel to the legend of "Bitter Bierce." Today Bierce is also well known as an adventurer, with his apparent death in Mexico one of the most celebrated among the literary-minded. While Bierce has not always enjoyed a wide body of readers, he consistently had a fierce and loyal readership who compared his writings to the likes of such masters of short fiction as Edgar Allen Poe and Guy de Maupassant. Indeed, Bierce's fame is deserved. One thing he is not known for, however, is his short story "The Boarded Window," which the author included in volume 2 of his *Collected Works.*

"The Boarded Window" falls into the genre of the weird tale, thus defined by the supernatural writer H.P. Lovecraft: "The true weird tale has something more than secret murder, bloody bones, or a sheeted form clanking chains according to rule. A certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces must be present; and there must be a hint, expressed with a seriousness and portentousness becoming its subject, of that most terrible conception of the human brain - malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults and the daemons of unplumbed space." At the turn of the century, many reputable writers, such as Mary E. Wilkins-Freeman and William Dean Howells, tried their hand at the weird tale. Thus Bierce was not alone in his exploration of the supernatural - seeing its manifestation in the everyday world - mixture of the psychological with the supernatural distinguish him. As H.E. Bates writes in his study *The Modern Short Story,* Bierce, . . . two forces were in incessant conflict: spirit against flesh, normal against normal. This clash, vibrat[es] in his work from beginning to end, keep[s] the slightest story nervous, restless, inquisitive." Bierce's short pieces, both the war fiction and the weird tales, overlap in their exploration of the horror of life.

"The Boarded Window" indeed hints of the supernatural but does not actually involve it. It is a relatively short tale, describing a man who lives alone in the sparsely settled forests outside of Cincinnati, Ohio. The man, Murlock, once had a wife, a farm, and an optimistic outlook on the future. After the death of his wife, however, Murlock became a recluse and died a solitary death. The story is related by an unidentified narrator, and the man's relation to Murlock is as mysterious as the events that lead to the wife's

death. In essence, Bierce has written a weird tale that works on two levels: that of the incident itself, and that of the role of the narrator.

Bierce infuses the second part of the story, the section that relates Murlock's sad tale, with hints of the supernatural. Bierce paints a convincingly eerie atmosphere, one that would encourage ghostly presence. Murlock's cabin is in the midst of a great forest that is filled only with "gloom and silence." Murlock's sleeping mind registers an "unearthly cry." He awakens to a state of "black darkness by the side of the dead." He hears "sounds of bare feet upon the floor" and waits "there in the darkness through seeming centuries of such dread as one may know." Then he hears a scuffling "and a confusion of sounds impossible to describe." All of these details lead the reader to believe what Murlock believes: that his dead wife has risen as a ghost.

In his utter terror at finding that his wife's body no longer rests upon the table, Murlock grabs for his rifle and shoots into the darkness. There, by the flash of the gunpowder, he sees an enormous panther dragging his wife toward the window. In his shocked state, Murlock loses consciousness. The next day when he awakens, he sees his dead wife's body lying on the floor. Apparently, she had not died of the illness but rather died later in the night from the wound the panther's teeth sunk into her throat, for underneath her is "a pool of blood not yet entirely coagulated." If that is not enough to demonstrate that his wife in fact was alive "[B]etween the teeth was a fragment of the animal's ear." Thus does Bierce do away with the idea of the supernatural tale. Bierce provides the answers to the sounds that scared Murlock in the night: the strange cry was the panther's call, the sounds of the bare feet were the panther's, and the scuffling was his wife desperately battling the great cat. In his fear, Murlock missed any chance at saving her life after the panther's attack.

During the night, before the panther incident, Murlock experiences a psychological state of alienation. So shocked is he by his wife's supposed death that he is unable to accept it and process it. He does not weep over his wife's passing, feeling "surprised and a little ashamed" by his own reaction. He speaks aloud, comforting himself: "[S]he is dead, of course, but it is all right - must be all right, somehow. Things cannot be as bad as they seem." While preparing her body "through his consciousness ran an undersense of conviction that all was right - that he should have her again as before, and everything explained." Such an understanding of Murlock's psychological state helps explain his instant belief that his wife has returned as a ghost. In refusing to accept his wife's death, he leaves open the possibility for her return.

Murlock's project of distancing himself only deepens after his wife's death. The man who once cleared his land lets the forest retake it. He ages prematurely, becoming a "burden bearer." He lives in extreme isolation with only the occasional hunter seeing him outside of his cabin. When he dies, he is alone. Indeed, although nothing supernatural occurred to take his wife from this earth, Murlock lives out the rest of his days as a haunted man. However, he appears to be haunted by the role he played in his wife's death. He is haunted by guilt, not by a ghost.

Yet while Bierce competently solves one mystery, "The Boarded Window" hides another, one that is not so easily solved: the relation of the narrator to Murlock. The narrator presents himself as having an authorial voice, thus, what he says should be taken as truth. He first demonstrates this authority through his depiction of the frontier region in the early 1800s, when Murlock's tale unfolds. With only a few words he describes the surrounding and sets up the scene as one that is fairly isolated and little inhabited. He also knows a bit about Murlock's background, for instance, that the man lived alone for years but that he had come to the country "young, strong and full of hope."

The words he chooses to share, however, prove the narrator to be unreliable. He constantly contradicts himself, thus subverting his own authority. He says that "every well-informed boy" knew Murlock's cabin to be haunted by a ghost, but he doesn't say how this knowledge - which would imply that others in the region knew of what had taken place there - came to be universal. In actuality, any neighbors had little knowledge of the wife. As the narrator states, she had "preceded" her husband in death "by so many years that local tradition had retained hardly a hint of her existence"; in fact, there was no longer even any "known record of her name." The narrator also repeatedly emphasizes the mystery of the evening in question, declaring of the boarded window of Murlock's cabin, "nobody could remember a time when it was not [boarded up]. And none knew why it was so closed." Almost immediately thereafter he confesses, "I fancy there are few persons living to-day who ever knew the secret of that window, but I am one, as you shall see." Finally, he reveals how he came to be privy to the information: "But there is an earlier chapter - that supplied by my grandfather." Thus essentially ends the role of the narrator. The rest of the story focuses on Murlock's sad tale, and indeed ends without ever returning to the narrator.

Readers are left with the question: What is the narrator's relation to Murlock? How does he come to know this information that no one else knows. While the narrator proposes an answer to this question - that his grandfather "had known him [Murlock] when living near by in that earlier day" - this answer is far from satisfactory. For the narrator has already described the land upon which Murlock lived as "surrounded on all sides by the great forest." Indeed, when his wife fell ill, her care rested solely upon him because there "was no physician within miles, no neighbor." How then, is the reader to believe that this man who elected to live, and die, in such isolation would choose to reveal his horrible story to a seemingly random person? It seems unlikely that he even has a neighbor.

A reader could likely conjecture that the narrator's grandfather is in actuality Murlock: the narrator is privy to facts, details, and knowledge that it would appear no other living soul has, not only about the night of the panther, but about Murlock's feelings and thoughts. The narrator explains Murlock's lack of reaction to his wife's death as due to the fact that "[H]e had no experience in grief; his capacity had not been enlarged by its use. His heart could not contain it all, nor did his imagination rightly conceive it. He did not know he was so hard struck; *that* knowledge would come later, and never go." Of these statements, only the last could be construed from the life that Murlock went on to lead. Clearly, Murlock was devastated by the death of his wife, otherwise he would not have retreated into his isolated state. The narrator, however, presents no plausible

explanation for his knowledge about how Murlock deals with grief. He even emphasizes his illogical authority when he says, "We may conceive Murlock to have been that way affected. . . (and here we are upon surer ground than that of conjecture)." The mystery of the narrator's relation to Murlock is never answered in any satisfactory fashion. Readers are left to form their own opinion, based on a brief text and insubstantial evidence.

Alfred Kazin has noted of Bierce's short stories, "There is invariably a sudden reversal, usually in a few lines near the end, that takes the story away from the reader, as it were, that overthrows his confidence in the nature of what he has been reading, that indeed overthrow's his confidence." This statement certainly applies to the ending of Murlock's tale, as the reader discovers that the wife did not die a natural death as Murlock thought, but at the teeth of the panther. Kazin's assertion also applies to the narrator in general, however, the noted lack of confidence comes not at the end but is instead pervasive throughout the story. As he has done so many times, in "The Boarded Window" Bierce presents a compelling story, one that is not at all what it seems.

Source: Rena Korb, for *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

Goldfarb has a Ph.D. in English and has published two books on the Victorian author William Makepeace Thackeray. In the following essay, he discusses the cryptic aspects of "The Boarded Window" and examines its treatment of reclusiveness.

In her 1984 study, *The Experimental Fictions of Ambrose Bierce,* Cathy Davidson says that some of Bierce's stories create a sense of "perceptual confusion" in the characters or the readers or both. There is a sense of mystery or "indeterminacy," sometimes with two different views of events being presented, so that it is hard to know what actually happened. Or, as in a story like "The Death of Halpin Frayser," everything is so uncertain that the reader is left utterly baffled.

Bierce's point in creating such bafflement may be to suggest that the world is a mysterious place that cannot be fully understood, and this may be what he is suggesting in "The Boarded Window." Certainly, the ending of that story raises all sorts of baffling questions. At first, in fact, it is hard to understand exactly what has happened, even on the most literal level, leaving aside its deeper significance.

A reclusive man named Murlock (at least, that is "said to be" his name: even this point is uncertain) has been nursing his sick wife. She dies. At least, she "apparently" dies. Her husband, totally isolated from civilization, makes the burial preparations himself, just as he previously had nursed her by himself. Before he buries her, however, on a night when she is still in their cabin, lying on a table, something enters through the window. A scuffle ensues. Murlock fires his rifle and sees by the glare of its discharge that a panther has his wife by the throat and is dragging her away. He falls unconscious. When he awakes, he sees his wife's body by the window: some still unclotted blood has come from her throat, her hands are clenched, and in her teeth is part of the panther's ear.

The ending contains a surprising twist, somewhat akin to the surprise endings of O. Henry, but with a sense of horror more reminiscent of Edgar Allan Poe. Mostly, though, there is a sense of confusion. What has happened? Was the wife not really dead? Was she just in some sort of coma, and when the panther attacked her, did she revive and fight back?

To S.T. Joshi in *The Weird Tale* this is what probably happened, because otherwise blood could not have flowed from the wife's throat. Also, how could she have bitten off the ear if she was truly dead? Joshi in general plays down the element of ambiguity in Bierce's work, saying in particular that it is almost always clear in Bierce's stories whether the supernatural is involved. However, Bierce does write stories in which corpses act like living people and the laws of nature are defied, so without further evidence how do we know that the wife was only in a coma? This could be one of Bierce's corpses come-to-life tales. Or it could be the sort of story Joshi says Bierce does not write: an ambiguous horror tale in which it is not clear whether there is anything supernatural or not.

Moving beyond the literal level, there are other puzzling questions, having to do with the significance of what has happened. Why does the panther come for the wife? What does that signify? And if the wife was really only in a coma, what point is Bierce trying to make? That Murlock was too ignorant on medical matters and should have gone for a doctor or a nurse? But then the panther would have killed her in any case.

The story raises other questions as well. For instance, why did the narrator throw stones at Murlock's ruined cabin? Also, why did Murlock board up the cabin window? Not to keep the sun out, the narrator says. Then why? His wife is dead; what more could happen? Is he afraid the panther will come for him? Is this some sort of symbolic protection against the dangerous world out there? But if it is so dangerous out there in the woods, why does he stay? He could move.

The narrator suggests that Murlock stays out of love for his wife, but is he right? Could he be staying out of guilt? Out of a feeling that he could have saved his wife by acting differently?

Perhaps the answers to some of these questions can be found by considering Murlock's reclusive nature. From the beginning of the story we are told that Murlock lived alone in the forest. Of course, before his wife died, he lived with her, but it is interesting that the main events of the plot are set in motion by Murlock's being away "gunning in a distant part of the forest" while his wife falls ill. He is perhaps too much apart, even from his wife.

He also seems to have an excessively antagonistic relationship to the natural world around him, as is indicated by his being off "gunning." And earlier, in describing Murlock's attempts at farming, the narrator makes him sound violent by talking of "the ravage wrought by [Murlock's] ax." The narrator also refers to Murlock's zeal for agriculture as a "flame," which makes him sound like a danger to the forest, although it is true that his flame is "failing" and "expiring in penitential ashes."

Murlock had arrived in the area "young, strong and full of hope" and had begun "laying sturdily about with his ax to hew out a farm" while also using his rifle to shoot wild game. After his wife's death, he lets the forest retake the land he had cleared for a farm, perhaps feeling guilty about his previous actions (hence the term "penitential" in describing what happened to his zeal for farming).

Perhaps what the story is trying to suggest in all this is that Murlock was both too much apart from other people (or civilization) and too antagonistic to nature. And what happens to his wife is then some sort of punishment, or a revenge taken by civilization and nature together. The panther is then a symbol of the world's hostility towards those who fail to interact with it normally, who push it away or attack it. Similarly, the narrator's throwing of stones at Murlock's cabin seems to represents the world's naturally hostile response to one who has kept himself too much to himself.

If the point, though, is to suggest the dangers of being a recluse, it is a point that Murlock himself does not grasp. He continues to live by himself. He may feel guilty over

what has happened, but he does not change his relationship with civilization. What does change is his relationship with nature; he gives up on the farm and lets the forest reclaim the land, out of guilt or resignation. He also ages prematurely and looks bowed down by a burden. He seems defeated by life. He has not fought well. When the panther attacked, he was at first frozen in paralysis; he fired too late and let the panther slash his wife's throat. Similarly, he was unable to protect his wife from her fever; and even in making her burial preparations he continually blundered. He had seemed so capable and strong, and yet it turns out he was not, perhaps because one man alone cannot be capable.

There remains the puzzle of the window. Why does Murlock board it up? Perhaps, like the firing of his rifle at the panther, it is simply a too tardy response to nature's attack. Perhaps it is a statement of despair, a way of withdrawing from the world that has defeated him - though why, then, does the narrator make a point of saying that Murlock likes to sun himself on his doorstep?

Still, despite his penchant for sunning himself outdoors, Murlock mostly seems to withdraw from the world, becoming an unsmiling, untalkative recluse. And despair does seem to underlie this withdrawal. The narrator suggests that his grief never leaves him; and as already mentioned, he looks prematurely aged and bowed down by a burden. Despair may thus explain his actions after his wife's death: his giving up on farming, his becoming more of a recluse, and his boarding up of the window as a symbolic form of withdrawal.

At the same time, the withdrawal, the despair, may be tinged by fear, and boarding up the window may be Murlock's attempt to ward off the dangers that have already carried off his wife.

In the end, it remains a bit of a mystery, and the mysterious effect is added to by the method of narration. The narrator has only heard the story from his grandfather; there are things he does not know. Indeed, there are things that nobody knows, for instance the name of the wife, the nature of her character, and so forth.

Even the happiness in Murlock's marriage is in doubt. The narrator assures us that the Murlocks had a happy marriage, but he does not really know that; he is deducing it from the fact that Murlock remained at the cabin after his wife's death. But in making this deduction, the narrator says that the memory of the supposedly happy marriage "chained that venturesome spirit [Murlock]" to the cabin: the use of the term "chained" does not suggest happiness, and the whole phrase reminds us how much of a venturesome spirit Murlock was, the sort of spirit who likes to be on his own and who therefore may feel chained, not happy, in a marriage.

In the end, then, this does seem to be one of Bierce's mysterious stories, part of whose point is that the world cannot be fully understood. But it is possible to say that Bierce here was exploring the dangers of reclusiveness and the revenge the world can take on those who spurn it.

Source: Sheldon Goldfarb, for *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2000.

Critical Essay #3

Brent has a Ph.D. in American Culture, specializing in cinema studies, from the University of Michigan. She is a freelance writer and teaches courses in American cinema. In the following essay, Brent discusses the literary device of the "unreliable narrator" in Bierce's short story.

Ambrose Bierce's short story, "The Boarded Window" is an example of his skillful use of an *unreliable narrator* to self-consciously illustrate the workings of the *oral tradition* in the creation of *ghost stories*. The literary device of the unreliable narrator refers to stories in which the teller of the tale is not to be trusted to tell *the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth*.Rather, the device of the unreliable narrator invites the reader to read *between the lines* of the story, and to question the narrator's motives in telling it. Often, such stories communicate more about the psychology or character of the narrator himself, than an accurate depiction of the events or characters he describes. In addition, the device of the unreliable narrator often communicates to the reader more about *the nature of story telling* than about the subject of the story itself.

Bierce's narrator in "The Boarded Window" relates as fact a bizarre, unlikely story, hinting at the supernatural. The story is patched together from a variety of *unreliable* sources, such as local lore, distant memory, a grandfather's story to a little boy, gossip, rumor, conjecture and pure imagination. In this way, Bierce pays homage to the oral roots of the ghost story, which lays claim to proof positive of supernatural events. In the following essay, I will examine the various unreliable sources of the so-called "facts" of the tale, as indicated by the narrator. I will also look at the points at which the narrator betrays the questionable nature of his tale, while simultaneously presenting it as truth. In using the literary device of the unreliable narrator, Bierce thus satirizes superstitions, such as belief in ghosts and other supernatural forces, by revealing the bogus evidence upon which such superstitions are built, and the process by which such stories develop through the oral tradition.

The narrator of "The Boarded Window" tells the story of an early American settler, who lived by himself in a log cabin in the semi-tamed wilderness of the Midwest. The log cabin he built for himself is said to have a single door in front, and a single window in the wall opposite the door. While the old settler is long dead at the telling of the tale, the narrator sets out to reveal the mystery of why the man would have boarded up the only window in his home. The narrator asserts that he may be one of only a few living beings who know the "secret" of why the single window in the cabin of a long-dead homesteader had remained boarded up for as long as anyone could remember.

The narrator relates this tale based on information from a number of categories of unreliable sources: childhood memory, local tradition, conjecture, bogus logic, and pure imagination. The narrator, however, confidently claims nearly exclusive knowledge of the true reasons for the boarded window - but, again, even this claim is based on conjecture as to who else knows the true story: "I fancy there are few persons living to-day who ever knew the secret of that window, but I am one, as you shall see." Such a

statement epitomizes the style of the unreliable narrator, who heartily asserts his exclusive claim to some truth, while simultaneously hinting to the reader that he is not to be trusted as a purveyor of truth.

The "secret" of the boarded window, as related by the narrator, is that Murlock's wife had become ill and died one night, upon which he prepared her body for burial the next day. Falling asleep at the table across from which the body was laid, Murlock awoke during the night to the sounds of screaming and scuffling. Grabbling his rifle, Murlock shot into the darkness. From the light of the gun's fire, he perceived the body of his wife locked in the jaws of a panther, which, frightened by the rifle shot, escaped through the window in the back of the cabin. In the light of day, Murlock found the body of his wife lying on the floor, in a pool of blood which had emanated from a throat wound imposed by the panther. Her hands were "tightly clenched," and "Between the teeth was a fragment of the animal's ear." Henceforward, Murlock's single window in his cabin was boarded up.

The narrator's earliest source of so-called knowledge of the "secret" of the boarded window is based on his own childhood memories. The primary basis of the narrator's knowledge is revealed to be, not his own acquaintance with the owner of the cabin, but his memory of a story his grandfather told him as a lad. This admission alerts the reader to the fact that this "true" story may be patched together from a series of distorted re-tellings: apparently, the narrator's grandfather had known the man "when living near by in that early day." The grandfather's original claim to knowledge of the true story of the boarded window may be assumed to be questionable in the first place, for the reader may conjecture that an old man telling his grandson a gruesome tale may engage in a distortion of facts for the sake of entertainment. Further, the narrator thus indicates that he is recalling from distant memory a story related to him as a young child, at an age when such fantastical tales are liable to be taken as indisputable fact.

The narrator further brings the story into the realm of childhood superstitions about ghosts and boyish bravado in throwing stones at supposedly haunted houses, for he recounts "the circumstance that many years afterward, in company with an equally intrepid spirit, I penetrated to the place and ventured near enough to the ruined cabin to throw a stone against it. . . ." The narrator thus alerts the reader further to the questionable nature of his assertions that he is "well-informed" as to the true story of the boarded window, for he states that, having thrown a stone at the abandoned cabin, he "ran away to avoid the ghost which every well-informed boy thereabout knew haunted the spot." Clearly, "what every well-informed boy" knows of local superstition regarding haunted houses is hardly convincingly presented as a reliable source of evidence.

In addition to these childhood memories of his grandfather's telling of the tale and his own "well-informed" knowledge of the circumstances of this ghost story, the narrator further reveals the sources of the tale to be unreliable to the extent that they are based on a sort of collective knowledge of the community in which the story takes place; the narrator cites as sources, both of his own and his grandfather's knowledge of the story, "tradition," small-town gossip, and local lore. The condition of the boarded window in this humble log cabin is first presented to the reader by way of a local collective memory

in the statement that, "nobody could remember a time when it was not" boarded up. Already, the narrator has indicated that this is a tale based on the local gossip and collective memory of a small settlement in the wilderness. Further evidence that the man's reasons for boarding up the window must be other than "the occupant's dislike of light and air," is rendered from local gossip based on the testimony of individuals who passed by the log cabin, "for on those rare occasions when a hunter had passed that lonely spot the recluse had commonly been seen sunning himself on his doorstep. . . ." Even information regarding the name of the recluse is presented on the basis of collective rumor, or local "tradition," of a small community, according to which, "his name was said to be Murlock."

The narrator goes on to relate his knowledge of Murlock's wife, and their marriage, in a manner which invites the reader to question the validity of this part of the story. In describing Murlock's wife, the narrator first asserts that "There is no known record of her name." By mentioning the concept of a "record," from which evidence may have been gathered, the narrator inadvertently highlights the discrepancy between his own unreliable sources for the story, and more legitimate sources of historical fact, such as written "records." He then explains that, "of her charms of mind and person tradition is silent." The mention of "tradition" places the burden of evidence on the unreliable source of local legend and community gossip; furthermore, that this tradition is "silent" on the matter of "her charms of mind and person" suggests to the reader that this communal silence may be born of tact. In other words, the reader is invited to speculate that perhaps Murlock's wife was not the least charming, and perhaps even an unpleasant woman. This seed of doubt is further nurtured through the narrator's statement that "the doubter is at liberty to entertain his doubt." But he immediately denies the validity of this "doubt" as to the charms of Murlock's wife, exclaiming, "But God forbid I should share it!" The overzealous statement on the part of the narrator as to his own lack of doubt has the effect of further reinforcing the reader's doubt - for the tone of the narrator's emphatic denial smacks of insincerity. But the narrator goes on to assure the reader that, "Of their affection and happiness there is abundant assurance. . . ." However, the "assurance" which follows involves a leap of logic not at all convincing.

The highly ironic tone of this passage of the story is a key to interpreting the significance of the events which lead to the death of Murlock's wife. The narrator, while assuring the reader of his own faith in the marital bliss between Murlock and his wife, simultaneously plants a seed of doubt as to the validity of this statement. In other words, the reader is invited to question Murlock's happiness with his wife. This doubt as to the quality of his marriage implies, by the end of the story, that perhaps Murlock had reason to *wish* his wife dead. The reader is thus alerted to the possibility that perhaps Murlock desired, either consciously or unconsciously, that his wife should die. This would explain his eagerness to determine her dead, to the point where he seemed to have prepared her for burial while she was yet still alive. Taken further, this line of thinking may cause the reader to speculate as to the actual cause of his wife's death.

The narrator's tale, though based on that of his grandfather, is further liberally embellished with no more recourse to fact than his own *imagination*, as he states, "From

what we know of a nature like his we may venture to sketch in some of the details of the outline picture drawn by my grandfather." The narrator thereby compares his tale to that of a drawing, in which the artist first "outlines" the details of his or his subject, and later "sketches in" the details. Bierce here makes use of his unreliable narrator to further imply to the reader that storytelling, particularly "true" ghost stories, are akin to the visual art of drawing - both are based on liberal use of the imagination in constructing a representation of "truth."

By use of an unreliable narrator, Bierce infuses "The Boarded Window" with a note of bemused irony, inviting the reader to relish the variety of unreliable sources from which ghost stories and local lore are patched together. Perhaps the closest surviving practice of such an oral tradition is the "ghost stories" children still tell each other late at night around campfires or at slumber parties, brought down through generations of "unreliable narrators."

Source: Liz Brent, for *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2000.

Topics for Further Study

Conduct research to find out more about the opening of the American frontier in the early 1800s, particularly such aspects as settlement patterns and economic trends. Do the comments of the narrator in "The Boarded Window" aptly reflect what you have learned?

Read some supernatural horror stories, such as those of Edgar Allen Poe or H.P. Lovecraft. How do true ghost stories compare to "The Boarded Window"?

Study gothic-type paintings such as Henry Fuseli's "The Nightmare" (1871). What elements of the supernatural do these works contain? What kind of mood is conveyed by them?

Analyze Murlock's reaction to his wife's apparent death from a psychological standpoint. Consult psychology reference books or textbooks as needed. Then write up a psychological profile of Murlock.

Read samples of Bierce's journalism from the 1890s. Then imagine that Bierce were writing a newspaper column about the events portrayed in "The Boarded Window." Write the piece as if you were Bierce, utilizing both his style and his outlook on life.

Bierce's literary reputation has often been questioned throughout the 20th century; he is constantly being "rediscovered" by a new generation of critics who claim his readership is not as large as it deserves to be. Do you think "The Boarded Window" adds to his literary reputation? Why or why not?

Compare and Contrast

1820s: There are fewer than 10 million people living in more than 1.7 million square miles of the United States. This averages to fewer than six people for every square mile.

1990s: The U.S. population is about 250 million on just over 3.6 million square miles of land. This averages to about 70 people for every square mile.

1820s: The United States is comprised of land stretching from the Atlantic Ocean to the Rocky Mountains. The land making up present-day Oregon and Washington is claimed by both Britain and the United States, while most of the West and Southwest is Spanish territory.

1990s: In addition to the 50 states, the United States holds the territories of Puerto Rico, the Northern Mariana Islands, American Samoa, Guam, the Federated States of Micronesia, the Republic of Palau, the U.S. Virgin Islands, as well as some smaller Pacific islands.

1830s: John Deere begins work on a steel plow to make plowing the soil easier, and Cyrus McCormick begins to develop a mechanical reaper to cut down wheat quickly and efficiently. These inventions allow midwestern farmers to plant and harvest huge wheat fields cheaply and quickly.

1990s: Farming in the 1990s is made easier by machines that do much of the work planting and harvesting crops. Breeding programs, crop technologies, and food-processing techniques also assist farmers.

Early to mid-1800s: Cincinnati is chartered as a city in 1819, and the completion of the Erie Canal and the coming of the railroad help it to develop into one of the largest cities in the United States by 1854.

1990s: With a population of about 346,000, Cincinnati is the third-largest city in Ohio. It still remains one of the largest inland coal ports in the United States.

What Do I Read Next?

The third volume of *The Collected Works of Ambrose Bierce* (1910) contains the majority of Bierce's supernatural and weird tales.

Turn-of-the-century author Mary E. Wilkins- Freeman was mainly noted for her regional fictions. Yet, in 1903's *The Wind in the Rose Bush* she collects her own assortment of weird tales.

In *The Deerslayer* (1841), James Fenimore Cooper explores the frontier culture developing as more whites settle in the western lands.

Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "Young Goodman Brown" (1835) depicts a pious man in Puritan New England who believes he sees a group of townspeople gathering in satanic worship. This startling event has a profound effect on Goodman Brown.

Carlos Fuentes's award-winning novel *The Old Gringo* (1985) is an imaginary account of what happened to Bierce after he disappeared in Mexico in 1913.

Willa Cather's novel *My Antonia* (1918) portrays the hardscrabble life on the Nebraska plains.

The Fall of the House of Usher (1839) by Edgar Allen Poe tells the twisted and perverse story of a family and its members descent into madness.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1891) mixes psychological realism and Gothic fiction in its depiction of a woman who is losing her mind.

Henry Miller creates an atmosphere of sinister evil in *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), a Victorian ghost story. The author tells the tale of the influence of two dead servants over their young charges.

Further Study

Bierce, Ambrose. *The Letters of Ambrose Bierce,* edited by Bertha Clark Pope, San Francisco: The Book Club of California, 1922, reprinted by Gordian Press, 1967.

A collection of some of Bierce's letters.

—. *A Sole Survivor, Bits of Autobiography,* edited by S. T. Joshi and David E. Schultz, Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1998.

A collection of Bierce's own writings, which reflect on his life, his adventures, and his thoughts.

Grenader, M. E. *Ambrose Bierce*, New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1971.

A critical overview of Bierce's major texts.

Lovecraft, Howard Phillips. *Supernatural Horror in Literature,* New York: Dover Publications, 1973.

A thorough discussion of the supernatural horror genre and its most important writers as well as schools of writing.

Morris, Roy, Jr. *Ambrose Bierce, Alone in Bad Company,* New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1995.

A biography of Bierce.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

BOOKRAGS

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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