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THE DICHOTOMOUS NATURE OF THE HUMAN MIND IN THE SHORT STORIES OF AMBROSE BIERCE - A STUDY IN PHILOSOPHY AS WELL AS PSYCHOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

Ambrose Gwinnett Bierce (1842-1914?) was best known during his lifetime for his vituperative political satire and acerbic wit in his legendary "Prattle" column as well as his epigrammatic Devils Dictionary. Modern Bierce scholars are now recognizing Bierce's unique mastery of the short story form, insofar as his stories reflect the mind of an iconoclast during an age of realism. One of the most fascinating aspects of Ambrose Bierce's short stories is the appearance of the double motif or doppelganger. Bierce extends the figure of the double, which appears in many of his stories, to reflect his dissatisfaction with the limitations of the contemporary realistic aesthetic and to express his pessimistic perspective on developing nineteenth century concepts of human psychology and his philosophical view of the double-edged human psyche, a theory about the dichotomous nature of the human mind— a study in philosophy as well as psychology.

Key Words: Ambrose Gwinnett Bierce, Doppelganger, Pessimistic Perspective on Human Psychology

An American Civil War hero as well as an editorial columnist for several newspapers, including William Randolph Hearst's San Francisco Examiner, Ambrose Gwinett Bierce (1842-1914?) was best known during his lifetime for his vituperative political satire and acerbic wit in his legendary "Prattle" column as well as his epigrammatic Devils Dictionary.

However, modern Bierce scholars are now recognizing Bierce's unique mastery of the short story form, insofar as his stories reflect the mind of an iconoclast during an age of realism. One of the most fascinating aspects of Ambrose Bierce's short stories is the appearance of the double motif or doppelganger. Bierce extends the figure of the double, which appears in many of his stories, to reflect his dissatisfaction with the limitations of the contemporary realistic aesthetic and to express his pessimistic perspective on developing nineteenth century concepts of human psychology and his philosophical view of the double-edged human psyche.

Doubles in fiction are separate characters who represent the extreme psychological components of a single human mind. Because of the superstitious fears and fascination surrounding their existence, doubles have appeared frequently throughout literary history. As either a "manifest" double (identical twin)

or a "latent" double (psychological twin), each protagonist instinctively depends on the existence of his or her complementary antagonist for survival despite the internecine nature their relationship. The double motif transcends time and is as old as storytelling itself.

There are many number of ways in which the Doppelganger appears in literature. Bierce makes use of the mirror image in *A Resumed Identity* and *John Bartine's Watch*. Another equally effective method is to depict the double as a twin, a device which appears in *One of Twins* and *The Mocking-Bird*. Finally, the most complex of these manifestations depicts the double as opposing forces. *The Death of Halpin Frayser* is a good example of such a conflict.

Like so many of Bierce's other narrative techniques, the use of the Doppelganger illustrates his interest in man's psychological conflicts, particularly those that threaten his sense of immortality. Robert Rogers points out that the mirror image as double is directly related to the Narcissus legend in which a young man falls in love with his own reflection in a puddle. He goes on to assert that the mirror double is particularly uncanny because it is an exact duplicate, not merely a similar self (Rogers, 19). *A Resumed Identity* offers the most simplistic treatment of this theme; yet, it shows Bierce's interest in the double in a more m o d e m sense as a harbinger of death. In this work an old man returns to the battlefields of his youth. At some point in his journey, he has also lost his memory. After this failure, he sees himself only as a young lieutenant who has been separated from his army. While searching for his companions, he becomes aware of his fatigue and the lean and withered appearance of his hands and face. However-, it is not until he sees his reflection in a puddle that his situation becomes clear: "Almost within an arm's length was a little depression in the earth; it had been filled by a recent rain— a pool of clear water. He crept to it to revive himself, lifted the upper part of his body on his trembling arms, thrust forward his head and saw the reflection of his face, as in a mirror. He uttered a terrible cry. "His arms gave way; he fell, face downward, into the pool and yielded up the life that had spanned another life" (III, 184). Much like Narcissus' reflection, then, this one causes the viewer's death and in that sense links Bierce's use of the mirror to the modern interpretation of the Doppelganger as a harbinger of death.

Another tale in which Bierce uses the mirror image is *John Bartine's Watch*. The protagonist of this work, John Bartine, expresses unusual trepidations concerning an inherited watch which his Tory great-grandfather had owned before his disappearance. When 3artine is questioned about his reaction to this occurrence, "he flamed out, bringing his clenched hand down upon the table as if he had been in a public house dicing with blackguards— 'my view of it is that it was a characteristically dastardly assassination by that damned traitor, Washington, and his ragamuffin rebels!'" (III, 271-72). Such an answer, of course, is distinctly out of place at the end of the nineteenth century; the character who really articulates this view is Bartine's Doppelganger, his Tory great-grandfather. That Bartine has a great deal of consanguinity with this figure is evidenced by the portrait in the watch cases:

> "That," he [Bartine] replied, gravely smiling, "is not I; it is my excellent great-grandfather, the late Bramwell Olcott Bartine, Esquire, of Virginia. He was younger then than later— about my age, in fact. It is said to resemble me; do you think so?"
>
> "Resemble you? I should say so! Barring the costume, which I supposed you to have assumed out of compliment to the art— or for vraisemblance t so to say— and the no mustache, that portrait is you in every feature, line, and expression." (III, 275-76)

This portrait, then, is a mirror image of Bartine. In addition, it is closely associated with the object of his fears, the watch. Though the narrator is responsible for Bartine's death, he understands, at the conclusion of the tale, the nature of Bartine's affliction: "He is buried, and his watch with him— I saw to that. Hay God rest his soul in Paradise, and the soul of his Virginian ancestor, if, indeed, they are two souls" (III, 279).

Another possible interpretation of the double in this work concentrates on the character of the narrator, a physician. Bartine, his guest, is burdened with the weight of heredity, and the physician acts as a catalyst to elicit information from him to purge his affliction. In this respect the narrator may be considered as the rational aspect of the protagonist's psyche which attempts to make him analyze his reactions to an emotional situation produced by a hereditary influence. Bartine's psychic partner forces him to confront his irrational response to this heredity, but understandably such a confrontation is too difficult and Bartine dies. At any rate, either interpretation shows Bierce's interest in the psychological impact of the double and his cognizance that the double can be used as a prophecy of impending death.

The second manifestation of the double which Bierce uses is the device of twins. Claire Rosenfield sees this device in terms of authorial awareness. She maintains that an author who uses such a technique does so to suggest the problems of inner duality and the subsequent terror certain characters exhibit. In the final analysis, the use of twins is an effort to depict psychic disintegration (Rosenfield, 328). Otto Rank, in discussing the complexities of twins in literature cites an interesting use of twins in Mark Twain's works:

> There Mark Twain "bemoans a fictitious twin-brother who, as he says, died as a baby. In response to the reporter's surprise that this forgotten incident should still move him to tears, Mark Twain goes on to explain the circumstances of the accident: he and his twin-brother looked as much alike as two peas, so that even their mother could not tell them apart. One morning, when they were taking their bath together, his little brother drowned; then, after some time, while everyone was mourning him, it was discovered that it was not his brother, after all, but he himself who had drowned. (Rank, 86)

Rank sees this formula as somehow indicative of the use of twins as doubles. One of the interchangeable twins dies for the other. These concerns are the basis for Bierce's tale, One of Twins.

John and Henry Stevens are identical twins:

> neither you nor, I believe, any human being could distinguish between him and me if we chose to seem alike. Our parents could not; ours is the only instance of which I have any knowledge of so close resemblance as that. I speak of my brother John, but I am not at all sure that his name was not Henry and mine John. We were regularly christened, but afterward, in the very act of tattooing us with small distinguishing marks, the operator lost his reckoning; and although I bear upon my forearm a small "H" and he bore a "J," it is by no means certain that the letters ought not to have been transposed. (Ill, 121-22)

This close resemblance, however, is not limited to mere physical appearance; they also share the same knowledge. For instance, in the tale the narrator, hopefully Henry, is invited to dinner by someone he does not know; yet, he accepts the invitation and adds: "'Please present my compliments to Mrs. Margo van and ask her to expect me'" (III, 124).

Henry, of course, cannot understand how he knows this rather odd name. His confusion is dispelled when he tells his brother about the encounter, and his brother's remarks illustrate their shared knowledge. John has asked Hr. Margo van for his address, though he has no idea why. This phenomenon, their shared knowledge, becomes the basis for the tale's conflict.

John soon becomes engaged to Margovan's daughter, whom Henry has not met. Henry has, however, seen a particularly beautiful woman— who he realizes "would recognize me at a glance" (III, 126)— engaged in a clandestine meeting with a dissipated man. .To his surprise, his brother's fiancee is that same woman. When Henry is alone with her he tells her: "'You, too, Miss Margovan, have a double: I saw her last Tuesday afternoon in Union square"' (III, 127). Once she realizes that Henry cannot be bought, she acts quite dejected. Henry, in fact, has demanded

that she not marry his brother. On the following evening, he feels a sense of evil and impending calamity. Finally, he hears shouts that sound like his brother. Unable to locate their source, he hurries to an unfamiliar house where he finds both Hiss Margovan and John dead of self-inflicted wounds. The reason for their deaths is not difficult to determine. Since the brothers possess the same knowledge, John has learned of his fiancée's infidelity through Henry's consciousness. Yet neither the reader nor other characters in the tale are certain exactly who is dead. This confusion is best illustrated when Henry confronts Miss Margovan's dissipated lover who thinks he is John. In this tale, Bierce's use of twins is both interesting and important because it shows his awareness of conscious and unconscious kinship between literal figures. There is no conflict in this tale between psychic halves; instead, there is incredible unity, a unity that, nonetheless, causes death.

The next tale, *The Mocking-Bird*, is the only gothic story in which Bierce employs a literal double to develop the concept of two belligerent psychic elements within a single personality. Bierce effectively utilizes the situation of brother fighting against brother, so common in the literature of the Civil War, to comment on the clash between two opposing psychic forces. Private William Grayrock, the protagonist, kills an intruder while on picket duty and is unable to locate the corpse. His fruitless search exhausts him, and he sleeps and dreams. This dream provides not only exposition concerning Grayrock's earlier life with his twin brother, the golden days pervaded by the melody of their pet mockingbird, but also establishes the basis for the psychic scission; "William (the dreamer) went to live in a populous city in the Realm of Conjecture, and John, crossing the river into the Enchanted Land, was taken to a distant region whose people in their lives and ways were said to be strange and wicked" (II, 226-27). While the brothers are together, the world about them reflects only peace and harmony. Their separation, William to the Realm of Conjecture (reason) and John to the Enchanted Land (emotion, imagination) marks the disintegration of a personality. Finally, William encounters both the mockingbird, whose song suggests the harmony of childhood, and his victim— the sentient portion of his psyche— John Grayrock. In this tale, Bierce uses twins as doubles to demonstrate what Albert Guerard calls a tragic loss "of a sense of identity and continuity in time." The double becomes an image of an opportunity missed, a harbinger of death or an attempt to suppress an aspect of personality. At any rate, William's awareness of his deed signals his own end, a death which is motivated by the personality's recognition that it somehow will never be whole again.

In the preceding tale, though it is based on the twin as double, the primary element in its development is a sense of opposition. Such an opposition is rarely trivial; in fact, it generally leads to a split in personality and. a "descent it to psychosis. This reaction occurs in such literature because the double generally represents a personality— the irrational— that man has attempted to disown. This irrational aspect coexists with our rational self, and, in double literature, often manifests its anti-social tendencies. Such a conflict is quite often depicted by authors in terms of two diametrically opposed characters; their antipathy, as Rogers's states, generally ranges from moderate philosophical disagreement to physical violence. Similarly, Otto Rank points out that the double is a part of the self which man has tried to escape, a part that usually has strong emotional connections to his past.- Though such a background is applicable to *The Mocking-Bird*, the tale which best illustrates these concerns is *The Death of Halpin Frayser*.

Halpin Frayser's identification with his great-grandfather, the poet Myron Bayne, is the first link in Bierce's use of the double in this tale. Frayser is thought of as a hopeless romantic who may embarrass the family by "bleating in meter" (III, 22). His interest in literature which his mother shares is described by Bierce as a "common guilt" (III, 23). In addition, Halpin's mother has a dream in which she sees Myron Bayne as a young man. This dream character forces her to look at her son's portrait which has been painted over with a face "such as we put on the dead"

(III, 25). There are, of course, many possible interpretations to this dream. In terms of the Doppelganger, however, the dream indicates that Frayser's creative abilities are being stifled, that his poetic energies should be set free. Of course, his mother's aching hands then become the agents which are silencing these abilities.

Another point of consanguinity between Frayser and his great-grandfather is their association with the moon. The family thinks of both men as subject to "glimpses of the moon" (III, 22), and the area where Frayser dies is in the vicinity of the Mountains of the Moon (III, 35). Yet, until his death, he lacks any sign of poetic ability. The most interesting aspect of Frayser's experience, however, is his own dream. In this dream, he is aware that his terrifying situation is the result of some past guilt or transgression, the exact nature of which he cannot remember. His courage will not allow him to submit to the horrors around him unheard, and he begins writing a dream poem. This, of course, represents a resurgence of the emotional aspect of his personality. While he is engaged in this activity, he is confronted by the evil spirit of his dead mother which eventually physically attacks him. At this instant, Frayser sees "this unnatural contest between a dead intelligence and a breathing mechanism only as a spectator— such fancies are in dreams; then he regained his identity almost as if by a leap forward into his body" (III, 2 9) . Until this leap, Frayser has been watching his double— the emotional aspect of his personality— which creates a poem and fights with his mother's spirit; after the leap, Frayser becomes, as Ann Ulanov suggests, a whole personality though the emotional and irrational aspect has become dominant. It is this imbalance that finally destroys him.

In terms of characterization, then, Bierce's use of the Doppelganger is very much in keeping with its modern usage; it depicts a split in personality and is a prophecy of impending death. Whether he employs the mirror image, twins, or opposed selves, they are all manifestations of this concern. However, it would be shortsighted to argue that the inspiration for creating the doppelganger is solely the result of intrapsychic conflict. Doubling is also very much in evidence in the external, physical world. Indeed, in "Compensation," Ralph Waldo Emerson relates that "an inevitable dualism bisects nature;" and as a reflection of this dualism, "each thing is a half, and suggests another thing to make it whole" (97). Ultimately, the double motif in the above short stories of Bierce represents a theory about the dichotomous nature of the human mind— a study in philosophy as well as psychology.

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